

# House of Commons Communities and Local Government Committee

# **Refuse Collection**

Fifth Report of Session 2006–07



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# Fifth Report of Session 2006–07

Report, together with formal minutes

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#### **Communities and Local Government Committee**

The Communities and Local Government Committee is appointed by the House of Commons to examine the expenditure, administration, and policy of the Department for Communities and Local Government and its associated bodies.

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# Summary

Refuse collection is one of the most routine activities of government and one that generates most public interest. For many, having their bins collected is the most important thing local government does, and a major reason why they pay council tax. Responsibility for collection and disposal belongs to around 400 local authorities in England and the historical development of such a disparate system means practice varies widely on timing and frequency and the types of materials collected and recycled. European Union landfill restrictions, designed to combat climate change, have driven a shift towards greater recycling as councils seek to avoid paying substantial fines.

Recently, alternate weekly collection (AWC) systems have proved controversial, often wrongly characterised as fortnightly collection. In fact, the schemes, adopted by about 40 per cent of English authorities, are meant to force or encourage householders to recycle by providing collection of waste one week and recyclables the next. Our strongest conclusion is that local councils are better placed than anyone, central Government included, to know what will work best for their local areas. AWC plainly works in some places—recycling rates have risen, and there is little public opposition. In other places, it has worked less well, notably where councils have "blundered into" introducing it without adequately informing local householders and council tax payers.

AWC equally clearly is not suitable everywhere: in cities and urban areas, congestion and limited storage space rules against it. Most controversy has arisen over food waste, with householders concerned that storing leftover food for a fortnight means more rat, fly and animal activity, with consequences for public health. Research has found no public health risk from AWC, but wider research is required to convince the public.

Changing systems allied with the enormous variety of collection and recycling schemes in existence have left the public confused, and we recommend moving towards a clear, understandable definition of what the public may expect.

The Government proposes to let councils operate financial incentive schemes aimed at rewarding positive recycling behaviour. The proposals fall short of recommendations made by Sir Michael Lyons and appear complex and timid. Rewards of as little as £20 a year are unlikely to prompt mass recycling, and as every winner will require a loser, those who end up paying even £20 more for a service most believe they pay for through taxation are likely to be significantly more aggrieved than the gainers are pleased. The schemes may have perverse effects, too, potentially increasing fly-tipping.

Finally, for all the political heat it generates, municipal refuse represents only 9 per cent of the total national waste stream. While its high profile guarantees media attention and policy focus, it is easy to forget far more can ultimately be achieved by reducing, recycling and reusing commercial, industrial and construction waste products and we recommend government gives increasing emphasis to the commercial waste sector.

# 1 Refuse collection

"waste collection is [...] the single most important universal service that most households get and pay for through their council tax."—Sally Keeble MP, House of Commons, 24 May 2007.

- 1. On the face of it, few services provided by government are more mundane than rubbish collection. Yet, as our inquiry has demonstrated, few subjects fire wider and deeper interest among both those who produce waste and those whose task it is to collect and dispose of it. Since everyone has a dustbin that needs to be emptied, everyone sees it as a fundamental local government service: as one witness put it, "everybody is an authority on refuse collection".<sup>1</sup>
- 2. There can be little doubt of the interest that household waste collection generates. In the few months since our inquiry was launched in March 2007, rubbish has been a significant issue in May's local council elections across England, the focus of a national newspaper campaign against perceived reductions in collection frequency, and the subject of intense debates on how and when it is collected, whether householders should be directly charged for collection and what England can do to reduce its growing torrent of used and/or discarded food, bottles, cans, newspapers, nappies, clothes, electrical goods, and garden waste. In late May, the Government sought to answer some of the questions raised in its new *Waste Strategy for England 2007*, proposing financial incentive schemes to encourage householders to cut, re-use or control what they throw away.
- 3. We received around 60 written submissions and examined directly the Chartered Institution of Wastes Management (CIWM), the Local Government Association (LGA) and the Greater London Authority, representatives of four individual collection authorities, and Ministers from the Departments for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) and for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA). In addition, 835 members of the public made their views and experiences known following an appearance by our Chair on the BBC Radio 4 "You and Yours" programme. We thank Phillip Ward, Director for Waste Implementation Programmes, at the Waste and Resources Action Programme (WRAP), for advising us throughout our inquiry.
- 4. Our primary purpose has been to identify how the ways in which local government collects household refuse can help reduce the amount of waste we produce and, in particular, the proportion sent to landfill. A little over 10 years ago, 84 per cent of our municipal waste—the refuse councils collect from homes and businesses, parks and street bins—went to fill holes in the ground; a little over 10 years from now, at present rates, there will, it is estimated, be no such holes left to fill.<sup>2</sup> The past decade has seen us slightly reduce the domestic waste we send to landfill, while significantly increasing the proportion

<sup>1</sup> Q 45

<sup>2</sup> House of Commons Library, Waste and Recycling Statistics; Library Standard note, 27 March 2006, and Local Government Association, Press release, 7 January 2007

we recycle. In 1997, just 7 per cent of English waste was recycled; last year, it was around 27 per cent, and the Government intend that figure to reach 50 per cent by 2020.

- 5. Yet, the strength of reaction that rubbish inspires may seem disproportionate to its true significance. Municipal waste collection in England accounts for less than one tenth of all waste: the rest comes from commerce, industry, mining, quarrying and construction (in all of which sectors, it is fair to say, recycling rates are higher than for municipal waste). Once the commercial waste that some councils collects is removed from the municipal total, the household component—what we put in our domestic bins, bags and boxes—is only around 7 per cent of the nation's waste. The efforts of the past decade may have quadrupled the household refuse recycling rate, but it is rarely pointed out that this equates to less than 2 per cent of the resources in the nation's total annual waste stream.
- 6. There is a further disparity between the public view of how we pay for waste collection and how it is actually funded. Refuse collection is one of local government's most visible services, and one of the few that is truly universal—unlike even education or social services. As the former local government Minister Sally Keeble MP noted in May's debate on the Government's new Waste Strategy many people see it as "the single most important universal service that most households get and pay for through their council tax".3 In the public mind, it is generally assumed that household refuse collection accounts for a substantial part of their annual or monthly council tax bills. Mid-Beds Council, which collects from 54,000 households, is not alone in acknowledging that "most residents regard the collection of waste and recycling to be the principal service they receive".4 In fact, although the figure varies around the country, the average annual cost of waste removal per council tax payer is estimated at as little as £75—equivalent to around £1.45 a week.<sup>5</sup>
- 7. In spite of the comparatively small contribution of household waste to the total and the perhaps surprisingly low cost to the householder of collection and disposal, a strong emphasis remains on diverting more household waste away from the traditional option of landfill, long recognised to be the least environmentally friendly disposal option. The desire to move up the "waste hierarchy" was identified seven years ago in the Government's Waste Strategy 2000 as the best way to deal with our ever-growing waste. Landfill sits at the bottom of the hierarchy, with incineration—including the recovery of energy from waste—just above. Recycling, on which there has been undoubted progress, is merely the middle option. The top two places are reserved for strategies aimed at the reuse of resources beyond their primary use and, highest of all, the reduction of waste.
- 8. Government policy over the coming decades will continue to drive us away from burying our rubbish, attempting instead to make us reduce waste, or re-use, recycle or compost what we do produce. Two imperatives drive this shift: environmental impact and money—on the one hand, "the potential to increase England's stock of valuable resources and also to contribute to energy policy" and on the other the need to avoid paying fines

HC Deb, 24 May 2007, col. 1472

RC 11, Mid-Beds District Council memorandum, printed in vol. II

National Audit Office, Reducing the reliance on landfill in England, HC 1177, July 2006, p. 19

#### 6 Refuse Collection

estimated at more than £200 million if European Union landfill diversion targets are not met by 2013.<sup>6</sup>

9. The primary principle underlying future policy must, then, be to prevent waste rather than disposing of it once we've made it, not least because of the knock-on benefits elsewhere: each tonne of household product is estimated to use around 10 tonnes of other resources. How, then, can households contribute, even if in a comparatively small way, not just to increasing the amount of refuse recycled but to reducing the amount of rubbish we all create in the first place?

# 2 Dealing with waste

10. Perhaps because the sheer volume of the waste we produce is so immense as to be unimaginable, there has been a strong tendency to reach for the homely metaphor. We are told repeatedly that we each throw out about seven times our own body weight each year; that enough rubbish is thrown away every hour to fill the Albert Hall; that the total value of discarded food averages out at £424 for every person in the country.7 While such examples may not always be precisely accurate, the temptation to use them to give meaning to the 272 million or so tonnes of waste England produces each year is considerable.8 Of those 272 million tonnes, though, fewer than a tenth are immediately relevant to this inquiry, being the amount collected from households and disposed of by local authorities.

Annual Waste Arisings in England		
Demolition and construction	32%	
Mining and Quarrying	30%	
Industrial	13%	
Commercial	11%	
MUNICIPAL	9%	
Dredged material	5%	

Table 1: derived from Waste Strategy for England, 2007, chart 1.2, p. 24

- 11. Municipal waste arisings in England totalled 28.7 million tonnes in 2005-06, with household waste at around 25.5 million tonnes (89 per cent).9 (The 3.2 million tonne difference is the waste councils collect from local commerce, by request, and usually with charges attached). Some 6.8 million tonnes were recycled or composted in 2005-06 (27.1 per cent), surpassing the Government's 25 per cent target.<sup>10</sup> The 2005-06 figures show the first overall reduction achieved in municipal waste arisings for many years—a 3 per cent cut from 29.6 million tonnes the previous year—although a five-year average to 2005-06 shows waste volumes still rising by about 0.5 per cent a year overall.<sup>11</sup>
- 12. Britain's traditional approach to its municipal rubbish has been to bury it or burn it. The past decade, however, has seen a substantial shift towards recycling, with more than a quarter of the waste collected from homes now recycled or composted. The percentage of

Richard Girling, Rubbish!, Eden Project Books, (2005) p.2; and RC 44, Waste and Resources Action Programme memorandum, printed in vol. II

DEFRA, Waste Strategy for England 2007. chart 1.2, p. 24

DEFRA, Municipal Waste Arisings in England 2000-01 to 2005-06, and RC 47, DEFRA and DCLG joint memorandum, printed in vol. II

<sup>10</sup> Environmental Data Services, Report 382, November 2006

RC 28, Environment Agency memorandum, printed in vol II

municipal waste sent to landfill fell from 82 per cent in 1998-99 to 62 per cent in 2005-06, but as recently as 2005 the UK nevertheless still sent proportionately more of its municipal waste to landfill than any of its then 14 EU partners, except Ireland and Greece<sup>12</sup>. The then Minister for Waste, Ben Bradshaw MP, told us that the foundations of Government policy were "landfill diversion and climate change". 13 As already noted in paragraph 8, the environmental impetus to reduce both the resources wasted and their negative impacts, such as the creation of methane gas from biodegradable waste, is underpinned by hard financial incentives.

- 13. The most immediate of these is the European Landfill Directive, under which England is required to landfill no more than 11.2 million tonnes of biodegradable municipal waste by 2009-10 and less than half that by 2019-20.14 The Government introduced a landfill tax in 1996 to encourage local authorities, and industrial and commercial producers, to reduce the amount of waste sent to landfill. The tax, currently £24 per tonne, will rise by £8 a tonne each year from April 2008 following the Chancellor of the Exchequer's last Budget decision to accelerate the rate at which it escalates. In April 2005, the Government also introduced the Landfill Allowance Trading Scheme, setting gradually reducing allowances for all disposal authorities for the amount of municipal waste they may landfill. Authorities under-using their allowances may trade any left over with other authorities or bank it against the future; those which exceed their allowance must pay fines of £150 a tonne. The National Audit Office (NAO) has highlighted the risk that local authorities could believe the Government unlikely to impose such penalties because of the probable pressure on council tax levels, but notes that DEFRA "has confirmed to us that penalties will be imposed if allowances are exceeded". 15
- 14. Aside from the financial incentives and penalties, the national shift towards greater recycling appears both to have driven and been driven by growing public awareness. The Government-sponsored WRAP, set up by DEFRA after the adoption of the *Waste Strategy* 2000, commissioned research in April 2006 that found 57 per cent of people could be classed "committed recyclers", validating the Community Recycling Network in saying: "The public wants to recycle. They want to do the right thing environmentally". 16
- 15. The NAO has warned, however, that the increase in waste recycled, while significant, has in effect merely allowed us to stand still: "Local authorities recycled an additional 2.5 million tonnes of municipal waste between 1996-97 and 2005-06. The increased recycling has been outweighed, however, by a 21 per cent increase in waste tonnage collected by authorities over the same period". 17 DEFRA rightly notes that the total waste being produced is growing less quickly both than it used to and than GDP—divorcing growth in waste from economic growth was a key aim of the Waste Strategy 2000—but even at 0.5 per cent annual growth, we still produce more domestic waste each year to collect and get rid of.

<sup>12</sup> DEFRA, Waste Strategy for England 2007, p. 23

<sup>13</sup> Q 210

<sup>14</sup> RC 47, DEFRA and DCLG joint memorandum, printed in vol. II

<sup>15</sup> RC 31, National Audit Office memorandum, printed in vol. II

RC 43, Community Recycling Network memorandum, printed in vol. II

<sup>17</sup> NAO, Reducing the reliance on landfill in England, p. 3

- 16. Nearly 400 local authorities in England deal with household waste. Collection and disposal responsibilities were separated in the local government reorganisation of the 1970s, and some 354 authorities, mostly district councils, collect our refuse, while 121 authorities receive and dispose of it. Collection and disposal jointly cost an estimated £2.4 billion in 2005-06.18
- 17. Some witnesses queried whether collection and disposal should continue to be treated as separate processes. West Devon Borough Council, for example, argued that they are "inextricably linked", while Shropshire Waste Partnership raised the "potential problem of a mismatch" where collection and disposal authorities take decisions independently of each other.<sup>19</sup> As the numerous examples of practical joint working revealed by our evidence suggest, local authorities are already acting together in some areas to overcome such difficulties, and examples of both good and less successful practice will be discussed in Chapter 6.
- 18. Central Government responsibility for waste policy and strategy rests with DEFRA. The Government's Waste Strategy for England 2007, issued on 24 May, includes new targets to reduce the amount of household waste not re-used, recycled or composted from the 18.6 million tonnes of 2005 to 15.8 million tonnes in 2010. It also sets out new re-use, recycling and composting targets—40 per cent by 2010, 45 per cent by 2015, and 50 per cent by 2020.20
- 19. DCLG has overall responsibility for local government, including its financing. It is also responsible for planning policy and is currently piloting through Parliament proposals allowing for the future creation of Joint Waste Authorities where councils choose to cooperate. The Government repeatedly made it clear to us that the way in which policy is implemented should be as far as possible a matter for the local authorities concerned. The Minister for Waste told us: "we do not think it is the role or job of central government to dictate to local authorities how they meet those objectives [...] How local authorities do it we believe is rightly up to them". 21 Nevertheless, DCLG is responsible for the local government performance framework, currently being revised to identify 200 indicators and 35 'local improvement targets', and the Government has signalled that proposals are being developed on waste performance indicators focusing on the amounts of municipal and household waste produced, recycled and landfilled: "It is envisaged that one focus for local improvement targets will be local authorities' performance on the average amount of household waste per person that is not re-used, recycled or composted". 22
- 20. We endorse the Government's clear indication that it intends to include measures on waste among the 200 indicators being developed for the new local government performance framework. Given refuse collection's significance and high public profile, we recommend that such indicators be priorities for inclusion among the 35 'local improvement targets' identified for each authority.

<sup>18</sup> NAO, Reducing the reliance on landfill in England, p. 10

<sup>19</sup> RC 15, West Devon Borough Council memorandum, and RC 34, Shropshire Waste Partnership memorandum, both

<sup>20</sup> DEFRA, Waste Strategy for England 2007, p. 103

<sup>21 0 212</sup> 

<sup>22</sup> DEFRA, Waste Strategy for England 2007, p. 86

- 21. Given the sheer number of bodies involved in refuse collection and disposal in England, it is worth highlighting three areas of potential tension. First, although DEFRA clearly has full responsibility for setting waste policy and strategy, DCLG is responsible both for the funding and the regulation of the local authorities who, at least for municipal waste, put it into practice. There is nothing unusual about Government departments sharing responsibilities across policy areas—DCLG in its local government role alone must interact with the Department for Education and Skills, with the Department for Health on social care matters and with the Home Office on the local funding and activities of the police and fire services, as just three examples—but it is worth stating the obvious fact that the two departments need to interact appropriately if the Government's overall policy goals are to be achieved.
- 22. Secondly, with central Government setting policy that local government must implement, there is obvious scope for tension over the level of autonomy afforded. The multiplicity of authorities involved, vastly differing geographical, social, economic and political factors in play, and highly varied ways in which local authorities have come to exercise their responsibilities all work against any risk of over-centralised control. The balance of our evidence has stressed that local councils are best placed to apply local solutions to local collection problems, and both DEFRA and DCLG have strongly committed themselves to leaving authorities to get on with the job. All the same, more than 350 authorities each operating their own system cannot possibly take an overall, holistic view of our growing waste problem. Central Government remains best placed to give nationwide guidance on what needs to be done, even if local authorities remain best placed to do it.
- 23. Thirdly, therefore, it is clear from the evidence taken that the presence of 354 local authorities which collect refuse may well mean there are in place up to 354 collection systems of widely differing method, frequency and scope. While the Minister for Waste is right to say devolution means local authorities making their own decisions, it is equally right to note that numerous witnesses have said, in effect, "If we were designing a system, we wouldn't start from here".<sup>23</sup> The NAO has also suggested that significant savings might arise if different authorities spent "less time reinventing the wheel".<sup>24</sup> We endorse the autonomy of local authorities and recognise their expertise in implementing the best solutions for their own areas. The problems posed by waste collection and disposal are not, however, confined within local governmental boundaries, and require a national response driven by a clear vision energetically communicated from central Government. We recommend that the Government commission research to evaluate the best local collection, recycling, re-use and reduction schemes operated by local authorities and to develop a strategy to encourage their widespread adoption.

# **3** Collection methods

"The Government does not believe it is right to prescribe from the centre how collection is done in different parts of the country. That is a matter for local authorities."—Waste Strategy for England 2007<sup>25</sup>

"we are all different and we do know what is best for our own patches."— Councillor Gary Porter, Leader, South Holland District Council

24. The myriad refuse collection systems in operation across England became headline news as newspapers both local and national focused attention in April on councils facing local elections in May. In particular, those councils that have over the past decade or so introduced new 'alternate weekly' collection (AWC) systems came under the spotlight. Whether this had any impact on the local election results is both unproven and beyond the scope of this report, but it once again highlighted the deep concern and passion that the subject can arouse, as exemplified by the submissions the inquiry received from the Campaign for Weekly Waste Collection and the Collect Refuse in Oxford Weekly campaign.26

25. Around 60 per cent of England's collection authorities operate what might be termed a traditional collection method. Once a week (sometimes more), a truck collects bags or bins from households, possibly gathering all the refuse in a single pile for sorting later, or more probably now expecting some form of householder pre-sorted division of recyclable material and the rest of the household waste. Around 140 authorities, however, have introduced AWC, a blanket term covering a range of methods based around the idea that the collection authority picks up recyclable materials one week and residual waste the next. These schemes have frequently been characterised as being 'fortnightly'; in fact, in all cases, refuse is collected weekly, just not all refuse every week.

26. Local authorities are required by section 45 of the Environmental Protection Act 1990 to collect household refuse without imposing any direct charge for doing so. They are also required to arrange for the collection of commercial waste where asked to do so, although they may charge for this. Charges are also permitted for collection of particular types of waste, such as bulky items (furniture, say, or fridges) and garden waste. The Household Waste Recycling Act 2003 requires all authorities to introduce collection of at least two types of recyclable waste from households by 2010. Since 2005, authorities have also had the power to issue fixed-penalty notices to householders who breach rules on how waste is to be presented for collection, including what may be put in bins. The Government is currently consulting on new financial incentive schemes for local authorities to encourage recycling, and it is expected that legislation will follow in the next parliamentary session.

<sup>25</sup> DEFRA, Waste Strategy for England, p. 73

<sup>26</sup> RC51, Campaign for Weekly Waste Collection memorandum, and RC 49, Collect Refuse in Oxford Weekly memorandum, both printed in vol. II

## Alternate weekly collection

27. Perhaps the most surprising thing about the recent controversy over AWC is its timing: the switch towards AWC has been happening across England for more than a decade, and many councils which have adopted the system claim substantial consequent increases in recycling, and by implication landfill diversion. The City of Lincoln District Council tripled its recycling rate; the Waste Partnership for Buckinghamshire cut landfill waste from 190,000 tonnes in 2005-06 to around 157,000 tonnes just two years later, at a time when waste volumes generally were still rising; and Uttlesford District Council saw recycling rise from 23 per cent to 50 per cent in a year, diverting an additional 7.7 tonnes from landfill in the process.<sup>27</sup> Many more local authorities have achieved similar change, and the Minister for Waste told us that 19 of the 20 English authorities with the best recycling rates had adopted AWC systems.<sup>28</sup>

28. The principle underlying these recycling increases is that AWC makes householders sort their waste into recyclable and residual waste, because the capacity to dispose of the residual waste is limited. With collection of only one or other type of waste each week, or with, in some areas, the introduction of relatively small bins for residual waste, householders either have to sort their waste carefully or see it piling up in their kitchens, gardens, sheds or other storage areas. Many councils quite openly use AWC to influence householder behaviour directly: "It is clear that an alternate weekly collection increases people's awareness of waste, making them more susceptible to waste reduction messages," noted St Edmundsbury Borough Council, a Suffolk collection authority operating a threebin alternate week system collecting residual waste, recyclables, and garden and kitchen waste.<sup>29</sup> Shropshire Waste Partnership went further, saying AWC is "forcing [householders] to be aware of the different ways of dealing with their own waste."30 Stephen Didsbury, Head of Waste and Street Services at Bexley Borough Council, told us AWC worked "Because [householders] are having to think about their waste. If they can just throw it away they do not have to think about it", but he preferred to "encourage" householders rather than "force" them.<sup>31</sup>

29. Two final points may be made about how AWC is expected to work positively. First, councils introducing the system should attempt to give householders separate containers for recyclable and residual waste with sufficient joint volume for total waste arisings, and to provide a bigger or smaller recycling box, bin or bag depending on the scale of the recycling service they offer. Secondly, one of the main benefits expected from AWC is that savings made in residual waste collection costs can fund greater investment in recycling services.

<sup>27</sup> RC 1, City of Lincoln District Council memorandum, RC 10, Waste Partnershipf or Buckinghamshire memorandum , and RC 13, Essex Waste Management Partnership memorandum, all printed in vol. II

<sup>28</sup> O 238

<sup>29</sup> RC 41, St Edmundsbury Borough Council memorandum, printed in vol. II

RC 34, Shropshire Waste Partnership memorandum, printed in vol. II

<sup>31</sup> QQ 6 and 7

## The case against AWC

30. Criticism of AWC has focused largely on three aspects—the perception that fortnightly collection of some forms of refuse is a reduction in service, the idea that councils are saving money by 'cutting' the number of collections, and the idea that having refuse uncollected for up to 14 days results in health risks or considerable nuisance from increased numbers of flies, maggots and vermin, and can cause unpleasant odours. A further, less explored question is whether the link made between AWC and increased recycling is a proven one.

31. It is clear that AWC has not always proved popular with residents in areas in which it has been introduced, although WRAP argues that nor is it generally seen by householders themselves as being any less convenient than traditional weekly collection. Sparse, a Local Government Association interest group representing largely rural authorities, said, for example, that the scheme's implementation in Uttlesford "did meet some resistance".32 The Minister for Waste told us there were "clear examples where local authorities have blundered into introducing alternate weekly collections without proper consultation, without proper planning."33 In many other areas, however, the adoption of new systems appears to have been generally accepted, particularly where the council concerned made strong efforts to inform residents of what they were doing and why. Melton Borough Council, in Leicestershire, was one of several authorities that ran "door-stepping" campaigns—"resource hungry in terms of labour and time but [...] very effective in changing the habits of householders. General information campaigns on 'how and why' to recycle are not as effective as personal engagement."34 Given the sensitivity of local opinion when it comes to changes in the ways refuse is collected, we recommend that the Government develop clear, straightforward best practice guidance on information provision to householders, using examples both of those local authorities that have introduced alternate weekly collection systems without prompting local concern and those who have, in the words of the Minister for Waste, "blundered into introducing alternate weekly collections without proper consultation, without proper planning".

32. The perception that AWC means fortnightly collection is the truth but not the whole truth. In short, waste collection is still weekly, just not for all waste every week. Stephen Didsbury, for the Chartered Institution of Wastes Management, told us: "Alternate week collection is a global name for quite a lot of different sorts of collection system. Not all of them are one week refuse, one week recycling. Generally, the common theme is that residual waste is fortnightly but not all of them do fortnightly recycling collections; some do weekly recycling collections. It is a name which is used generally but does not mean the same in every place."35 Nor is the practice universally applied across those authorities which have adopted it: many councils (the City of Lincoln, for example) retain weekly collections of all types of waste where particular local circumstances warrant it—for urban areas or for blocks of flats, for example<sup>36</sup>. The Minister for Waste said that the pattern of

<sup>32</sup> RC 46, Greater London Authority memorandum, printed in vol. II

<sup>33</sup> O 237

<sup>34</sup> RC 12, Melton Borough Council memorandum, printed in vol. II

<sup>35</sup> 

RC 1, City of Lincoln District Council memorandum, printed in vol. II

AWC implementation would "lead one to the impression that it is easier to do in rural, semi-rural and suburban areas than it is in inner city areas of high-density housing with multiple occupancy and blocks of flats".37

33. There appears to be some evidence that councils can save money by introducing AWC systems, partly through economies of scale and more efficient collection systems. In the short term, those savings may be used to pay for investment in the new recycling services required to make AWC work, but in the longer run savings should build as councils avoid paying landfill tax or fines for breaching landfill allowance limits. Gary Alderson, Director of Environmental and Planning Services for Mid-Beds Council, told us his council saved £700,000 in its first year of AWC, partly because splitting collection vehicles to collect both residual and recyclable wastes allowed it to reduce the number of vehicles needed.<sup>38</sup> Further cost savings are achievable through authorities co-operating across district council boundaries (a point to be covered in more detail in Chapter 6 on Joint Waste Authorities). Essex Waste Partnership, for example, predicts savings of up to £1 million a year from joint collection by four of its 12 authorities.<sup>39</sup>

### **Food waste**

34. The most widespread criticism of AWC systems has focused on the disposal of food waste, largely on arguments that non-collection for up to 14 days could result in health risks from increased fly and maggot populations, from bags being torn by birds or foxes, and from unpleasant smells. Kitchen waste is around one fifth (about 6 million tonnes) of all household waste, but is comparatively low on the list of waste streams councils collect separately for recycling or composting, with only around 50 English authorities doing so by last December. 40 The Government believes there are "strong arguments for encouraging more separate collection of food waste", and the Government-funded WRAP is supporting a number of local trials over the next year to identify how best to do that. 41

35. Around one third of all food bought in the UK is not eaten but disposed of, says WRAP.42 Reasons may include poor household meal planning and over-purchase of foodstuffs, including those with soon-to-pass sell-by dates and perishable goods, such as fruit, on two-for-one or half-price offers. Launching the Government's new Waste Strategy, the then Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, the Rt hon. David Miliband MP, told the House of Commons that "about £400 a year is being wasted by families, so that waste is actually hitting people in their pockets, as well as affecting their local environment."43 WRAP plans to launch a campaign in the autumn to raise awareness of food waste and of simple measures that could be taken to reduce it.<sup>44</sup> Up to one third of food purchased is disposed of without being eaten, perhaps the most shocking example of utter waste revealed during our inquiry. Householders are throwing away £400 a

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37 Q 241
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<sup>38</sup> Q 129 and RC 11

RC 13, Essex Waste Management Partnership memorandum, printed in vol. II 39

<sup>40</sup> Environmental Data Services, Report 383, December 2006, p. 19

<sup>41</sup> DEFRA, Waste Strategy for England 2007, p. 74

<sup>42</sup> RC 44, Waste and Resources Action Programme memorandum, printed in vol. II

HC Deb, 24 May 2007, col. 1476

RC 44, Waste and Resources Action Programme memorandum, printed in vol. II

year. Councils are forced to waste their time and our money clearing up our leftovers, which are often the most problematic part of domestic waste. We recommend that Government set specific targets for food waste reduction and follow through on the Waste and Resources Action Programme's autumn food waste information campaign by promoting some simple measures households can take such as menu planning and improved storage, and by encouraging supermarkets and other retailers to help customers avoid waste by, for example, packaging perishable goods in sizes suitable for both single and family households.

## AWC and public health

36. Less frequent collection of food waste has also prompted fears about public health. Local campaigning organisations such as the Campaign for Weekly Waste Collection (CWWC) and Collect Refuse in Oxford Weekly have supplied examples of emails from householders across the country who have experienced difficulties with rats, flies and maggots. Doretta Cocks, who set up the CWWC following the introduction of AWC in her home town, Eastleigh in Hampshire, wrote: "people were experiencing fly and maggot infestations on a regular basis and almost all residents commented on foul odours emanating from bins in warm/hot weather conditions."45 A substantial proportion of the 835 members of the public who telephoned or emailed BBC Radio 4 following our Chair's appearance on the "You and Yours" programme also raised fears about health or simply highlighted the nuisance of having food waste around for up to a fortnight.

37. In response, DEFRA has said there is no evidence that AWC increases health risks. The main survey conducted into the health impacts of AWC, the Wycombe report carried out with DEFRA funding by Enviros Consulting and the University of Cranfield in February 2007, concludes: "The research indicates that no significant adverse health effects are likely to be caused by alternate week waste collections of residual and biodegradable waste."46 Gary Alderson, Director of Environmental and Planning Services for Mid-Beds Council, said "we have had [AWC] in 54,000 houses over two years now and we have not seen epidemics and new diseases coming."47 The Chartered Institute of Environmental Health agrees there is no evidence of health risk, provided food waste is adequately dealt with.<sup>48</sup> And the Minister for Waste stressed that in spite of media concern about perceived health risks the Department of Health had made it clear that there was none. 49 We recognise that research conducted to date into the health impacts of alternate weekly collection systems has found no evidence of adverse health impacts. Given the strength of public concern, however, allied with the wealth of anecdotal evidence about increased populations of flies, maggots, rats and other vermin associated with AWC systems, we strongly recommend that the Government commission further and more detailed research if the public is to be persuaded that there is no appreciable risk.

<sup>45</sup> RC 51, Campaign for Weekly Waste Collection memorandum, printed in vol. II

<sup>46</sup> DEFRA Waste Implementation Programme, Wycombe District Council: Health impact assessment of alternate week waste collections of biodegradable waste, A report by Cranfield University and Enviros Consulting Limited: February 2007, p. 3

<sup>47</sup> O 188

<sup>48</sup> CIEH, Press notice 9 May 2007, see www.cieh.org/news

<sup>49</sup> O 245

38. The Wycombe report also contained a rider to the statement that there was no evidence of health risk, recommending that householders should take a series of "common-sense steps" to prevent odours or maggot infestations. These steps include: cleaning waste containers with disinfectant; keeping them out of sunlight if possible; keeping all waste tightly wrapped or in containers; and ensuring that containers holding kitchen waste are kept closed.<sup>50</sup> The Minister for Waste told us "It is pretty blindingly obvious that if you leave bags out in the street they are more likely to be torn by seagulls, rats and urban foxes than if you put waste in a wheelie bin."51 Perhaps less blindingly obvious is the fact that even if most of the councils that have switched to AWC use hardsided bins, there are a few, according to Stephen Didsbury of the Chartered Institution of Wastes Management, that still use bags.<sup>52</sup> Increasing rat, fly and maggot populations are a considerable nuisance to individual householders, a point that should not be overshadowed by greater concern about public health risks. If councils are to collect food and kitchen waste only once every two weeks as part of an AWC system, Government guidance must stress the absolute necessity to provide householders with sealable containers, such as hard-sided wheeled bins or boxes.

39. Even more than encouraging householders to take common-sense steps to deal with food waste, however, it may be desirable to ensure that food waste is collected from households every week wherever possible and practicable. Councillor Porter, Leader of South Holland Council, said he was "sure people would not care if their recycling was in a big bin for a month because it is dry [...] we still need to get the really interesting part of the waste out, and that is the contaminated food waste."53 Nicola Beach, Essex County Council's Head of Waste and Recycling, also said food waste caused the most difficulty with AWC, suggesting it should be "addressed on a weekly basis, with all the benefits that brings in terms of diverting biodegradable waste from landfill".54 WRAP "suggests that separate collection of food waste on a weekly basis should be seen as a preferred option on environmental grounds for most local authorities."55 And the Minister for Waste pointed up the desirability of more separate collection of food waste, adding that "Food waste going to landfill is one of the worst waste materials going to landfill because it biodegrades and creates methane which is a very potent greenhouse gas [...] there are good arguments for separate food waste collections and [...]research shows that where you have separate food waste collections it makes sense to have them weekly".56 While those comments are welcome, it remains the case that a comparatively small proportion of local collection authorities do collect food waste separately. Food waste represents nearly a fifth of the total household waste stream and is a particularly significant contributor to greenhouse gases when sent to landfill. We recommend that Government encourage

<sup>50</sup> DEFRA Waste Implementation Programme, Wycombe District Council: Health impact assessment of alternate week waste collections of biodegradable waste, A report by Cranfield University and Enviros Consulting Limited: February 2007

<sup>51</sup> O 242

<sup>52</sup> Q 33

<sup>53</sup> Q 184

<sup>54</sup> O 187

<sup>55</sup> RC 44, Waste and Resources Action Programme memorandum, printed in vol. II

<sup>56</sup> O 245

more local authorities to adopt both separate food waste collection and at least weekly food waste collection.

#### Minimisation measures

40. An allied issue arising from the discussion of AWC and health impacts is the size and type of receptacles used for household waste. In December 2002, Dr Julian Parfitt, a principal analyst for WRAP, noted, following the widespread introduction of wheeled bins in the UK that householders with the largest standard-size bins, 240 litres, were putting out more waste for collection than others (although this may have been qualified by their taking less waste to civic amenity sites for disposal).<sup>57</sup> Councillor Porter, staunchly defending both weekly household collection of all waste and the use of bin bags, argued that providing wheeled bins may actually increase the amount of refuse householders put into the waste stream. He also pointed out that it is far harder for householders using bags rather than bins to hide things they shouldn't be throwing out—bricks, garden waste or builders' rubble, for example. 58 The widespread introduction of wheeled bins from the early 1990s may therefore have had, at least in the short term, perverse unintended consequences. As Gary Alderson, Director of Environmental and Planning Services at Mid-Beds Council, said, "there was a challenge, 'Could you fill your wheelie bin?'. There was a whole different era of waste minimisation: it was waste maximisation in those days."59

41. Interestingly, councils introducing AWC schemes have frequently taken the opportunity to reverse that by introducing smaller bins or boxes. In addition, several—e.g., City of Lincoln, East Lindsey (Lincolnshire) and four of five District Councils in the Cambridgeshire Waste Partnership—did not collect 'side waste' that did not fit into bins as a further measure intended to force householders to reduce what they put out for collection.<sup>60</sup> East Lindsey noted that it "specifically chose small (180 ltr rather than 240 ltr) bins to encourage people to throw out less."61 It appears almost to be a given in many local authority areas that simply reducing householders' physical ability to put refuse into the waste collection stream by restricting the size of bins or boxes or by setting non-collection policies for additional waste is in itself a waste minimisation measure. Others have sought to achieve the same limitation by fixing the number of bags each household may use, and charging for any additional bags; North Dorset District Council, for instance, charges £1 per extra sack.<sup>62</sup> We presume that authorities making such extra charges have legal advice that these practices are lawful, but we suggest that the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, in preparing any further legislation, clarify the legal situation on additional charges for rubbish sacks and that the Department learn from the knowledge those authorities have developed of the practicality and efficacy of such systems. As we shall see later, however, simply removing waste from household collection

Dr Julian Parfitt, Analysis of household waste composition and factors driving waste increases, WRAP, December 2006, pp. 16-18

<sup>58</sup> Q 120

<sup>59</sup> 0 134

RC 1, City of Lincoln District Council memorandum, RC 5 East Lindsey District Council memorandum, and RC 26, Cambridgeshire County Council memorandum, all printed in vol. II

RC 5, East Lindsey District Council memorandum, printed in vol. II

<sup>62</sup> RC 27, North Dorset District Council memorandum, printed in vol. II

does not necessarily mean there is less waste. For example, waste not placed in a household bin may end up in a fly-tip.

- 42. Finally, the way in which garden waste is treated provides a useful example of both the variety of collection methods used by councils and the perverse incentives that can sometimes be thrown up by the way in which we measure municipal waste.
- 43. Some councils collect garden waste as residual waste, others deal with it as a separate stream and others still charge for its collection. South Holland District Council, for example, argued that charging for garden waste both encouraged householders to compost it in order to avoid paying and reduced the total amount of household waste the council had to collect.<sup>63</sup> Shropshire Waste Partnership, which did provide separate green waste collection, nonetheless agreed that that could increase the total waste to be collected and processed.<sup>64</sup> Differences in approach to the collection of this one waste stream highlight a potential problem both with having numerous authorities operating differently and with the way in which waste is measured. Ian Davies, of Hammersmith and Fulham Borough Council, pointed out that urban authorities such as his have small amounts of garden waste arising when compared with more leafy, rural areas.<sup>65</sup> The smaller proportion of garden waste in the stream means, of itself, that the proportion of waste which can be composted is smaller. That results in the percentage of recycled/composted waste in such authorities being lower than it is elsewhere, not as a result of performance but simply because of the type of material being collected. It also discriminates against local authorities which actively promote home composting instead of garden waste collections. While the current best value performance indicators (BVPIs) distinguish between dry recycling and composting rates, the clear implication is that collection levels and composting and recycling rates cannot always be accurately compared from one area against another because of differences in what is considered municipal or household waste. Local autonomy may, in this case, make it difficult to achieve holistic, nationwide goals.

## Recycling: pre-sorted versus co-mingled waste collection

44. Just as there is no common collection system and no common practice on the use of bins or bags for refuse, there is no one-size-fits-all approach to recycling. The spread and growing acceptance of kerbside schemes creates a fundamental debate on collection methods however: whether waste should be collected all together—co-mingled—and then sorted on the dustcart or at a Materials Recycling Facility (MRF), or whether householders should be encouraged to separate their waste into as many streams as possible before collection. Once again the myriad factors that explain the kaleidoscope of collection systems in place across England is relevant: multi-streamed pre-sorting by a householder is likely to be much easier in a rural house with a back garden or yard than it is in a onebedroomed upstairs flat in the centre of a city. Stephen Didsbury of the CIWM told us that his own local authority, Bexley, collected refuse from flats two or three times a week, using communal bins, because of lack of space to store waste for any longer.<sup>66</sup> Ian Davies,

<sup>63</sup> O 122

<sup>64</sup> RC 34, Shropshire Waste Partnership memorandum, printed in vol. II

<sup>65</sup> Q 153

<sup>66</sup> Q 13

Assistant Director, Public Protection and Safety, at the London Borough of Hammersmith and Fulham, ruled out AWC as a viable option for a highly urban area: "If you live in a one-bedroom flat or a studio flat there simply is not room [...] To expect somebody to store waste in their property for up to ten or 14 days while they are waiting for an alternate weekly collection is simply not going to happen in an urban environment where you have got small properties."67 For that reason, some urban councils favour the simplicity of comingled collection: "it makes it much faster. In a dense urban environment, there is lots of traffic and you cannot have a situation where a refuse vehicle is parked in the street and they are sorting refuse into the back of that vehicle".68 As yet, AWC has been introduced mainly in rural areas, although cities such as Cambridge, Carlisle, Exeter and York, and two of London's 32 boroughs, Harrow and Kingston-upon-Thames, have done so.<sup>69</sup> None of the major, densely populated metropolitan areas has an AWC system. Further constraints on sorting waste are its ultimate destination: South Holland District Council, for example, co-mingles collection because the whole lot goes to landfill in the absence of any local MRF.70 And, as that example shows, this depends strongly on the planning decisions local authorities have already made about how their waste should be dealt with: those collection authorities whose disposal authorities have built or approved MRFs have different choices from those where incinerators or landfill are the available options. The long-term nature of such choices—WRAP notes that it can take 12 to 18 years to repay investment in an incinerator, for example—means that planning decisions made a decade or more ago can constrain what councils can do now.<sup>71</sup> Equally, decisions taken now will affect waste collection and disposal policy in decades to come.

45. There is nevertheless a clear trend towards encouraging householders to sort more of their waste before it reaches the dustbin. Following Barnet Council's lead in March 2005, a significant number of local authorities now operate some form of compulsory recycling scheme, requiring separation into specified containers, under powers contained in the Environmental Protection Act 1990. By 2010, all authorities will have to provide means of recycling at least two materials. The LGA has suggested local authorities should be given statutory minimum recycling levels.<sup>72</sup> In April, the Government set performance standards on recycling and composting for all local authorities for the year 2007-08, setting a minimum performance standard of 20 per cent across the country.<sup>73</sup> We note that the Government has set recycling performance targets for local authorities and that the Local Government Association argues for statutory performance targets. We endorse the Government's devolutionary intent to allow collection authorities as much freedom as possible to implement waste policy, but recommend that Government enter into discussion with local authorities about the creation of statutory targets.

46. The Government is currently consulting on the introduction of financial incentive schemes to encourage householders to recycle more, and has said authorities introducing

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67 O 144
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<sup>68</sup> O 145

<sup>69</sup> RC 29, Chartered Institution of Wastes Management memorandum, printed in vol. II

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RC 44, Waste and Resources Action Programme memorandum, printed in vol. II 71

RC 59, London Councils memorandum, printed in vol. II

<sup>73</sup> DEFRA, Waste Strategy for England 2007, p. 85

schemes would have to provide facilities for kerbside recycling of five waste streams, possibly including paper, glass, cans, plastics and food waste.74 ENCAMS, the environmental charity which runs the Keep Britain Tidy campaign, notes that "the public are willing to recycle if the facilities are in place to enable them."75 WRAP has entered a note of caution in supporting the need for good-quality recycling services to be in place before any authority moves to introduce incentive charging, but recognising that recycling collections are significantly more complex to organise and that "There remains an absolute shortage of experienced officers to manage the more complex systems."<sup>76</sup> The number of fully trained and experienced local authority recycling officers remains low, restricting the spread and sophistication of schemes available. The continuation of statutory local authority recycling targets, rather than any shift towards merely residual waste targets, would help drive more officer training and development of greater expertise.

## Confusing the public: multi-coloured collection

47. Several witnesses highlighted the confusion that the existence of varying systems of collection, varying types of what may or may not be recycled, and varying provision of bags, boxes and bins in many and differing colours can cause. The National Association of Residents' Associations wrote of serious problems resulting from the "provision of several containers for re-cycled materials, the introduction of selective collections of the different types of waste, the frequency of such collections and the penalties for non-compliance with the imposed regimes". 77 A number of councils specifically ruled out the introduction of variously coloured bins on the grounds of keeping their systems simple and easy to understand. Councillor Paul Bettison, Chair of the LGA's Environmental Board, pointed out that while "the media make a big issue about confusions [...] Most people in this country only have one home so they only have to come to terms with one set of colour bins". Councillor Bettison also accepted, though, that: "If we were starting from day one I am sure we would have a national colour code. Regrettably we are not".78 INCPEN, the Industry Council for Packaging and the Environment, also regretted that "It is clearly too late to impose national standards on collection schemes [...] It is not even practicable to require authorities to move towards using a nationally consistent colour system when replacing their collection containers in future."<sup>79</sup> The Minister for Waste doubted whether some kind of national system for recyclables might be appropriate: "People say, 'Why can we not have the same system everywhere?' [...] it would be nice and more simple [...] It would be hugely expensive, however, to force local authorities that have either invested in MRFs or in kerbside recycling to change their systems."80 Nonetheless, some confusion exists from area to area about the timing and frequency of collections, and about the type of materials that may be recycled. It is true that most people need only know the system that prevails for their household, but we all move from time to time and from area to area, and the fact that our families and friends may be able to recycle entirely different materials

DEFRA, Consultation on the Incentives for Recycling by Households, May 2007, p. 16

<sup>75</sup> RC 37, ENCAMS memorandum, printed in vol. II

RC 44, Waste and Resources Action Programme, printed in vol. II

<sup>77</sup> RC 2, National Organisation of Residents Associations memorandum, printed in vol. II

<sup>78</sup> 

RC 25, Industry Council for Packaging and the Environment memorandum, printed in vol. II

<sup>80</sup> 

in entirely different ways or that the authority next door might collect, say, newspapers in green boxes while our council collects in brown boxes can create uncertainty. If simplicity is the key to recycling success, this is one area for obvious attention. Indeed, WRAP has already developed a national Recycle Now campaign suggesting a standard set of symbols and colours to identify containers for recyclable materials, using stickers if replacing the containers themselves is too expensive or otherwise impractical. About three-quarters of English authorities have adopted some parts of the campaign.

48. For a variety of historical, geographical, economic and other reasons, practice on the collection of recyclable materials has grown in a piecemeal, haphazard fashion across England over the past decade and more, resulting in myriad local systems and some public confusion. A national recycling system is clearly not feasible in the short term, and the imposition of such a system from the centre would run counter to the Government's proper desire to let councils implement collection strategies suitable to their own areas and electorates. Nonetheless, we urge the Government to evaluate means of achieving more public understanding and co-operation by reducing random and unnecessary differences in practice across local authority boundaries. In particular, wider application of WRAP's national colour-coded recycling system for paper and card, glass, metals and food waste would give not just clarity and simplicity, but substantial long-term economies of scale.

## Does AWC increase recycling?

49. Proponents of AWC claim its major benefit lies in the increased recycling rates it allows councils to achieve. As noted above, 19 of the top 20 rates for recycling are achieved by those using AWC. The LGA has been particularly robust in offering this figure as evidence that AWC is essential to improved recycling.<sup>81</sup> Two factors need to be set against this: first, AWC simply is not suitable for all areas as the evidence outlined above shows; and, there is not necessarily a causal link between the adoption of AWC and a council's success in recycling. For one thing, as the 19 from 20 figure itself demonstrates, there are councils achieving the highest rates while still operating weekly collection of all waste. Secondly, as the Minister for Waste pointed out to us, those councils achieving high rates of recycling after adoption of AWC may well already have been among the best performers. Thirdly, the adoption of AWC invariably goes with a new local emphasis on waste diversion and recycling-information campaigns, the provision of new bins or boxes. It is not, therefore, the only factor in improving local recycling rates. The adoption of alternate weekly collection systems in around 140 local authority areas has been accompanied in most of them by rapid and substantial increases in local recycling. Whether there is a direct causal link between those two facts is, however, unproven: AWC, where it has been introduced, is always part of a package of measures aimed at encouraging householders to sort more of their waste for recycling. AWC is clearly not appropriate to all areas, particularly highly urban areas characterised by much shared accommodation. Whether a weekly or alternate system is best for a particular area is a matter of local circumstance and a matter for local choice.

## Confusing the public: terminological obfuscation

50. One further simple point can be made about alternate weekly collection. In the run-up to England's local council elections in May, much controversy centred on AWC, with the system frequently characterised in newspaper reports as "fortnightly". It is, to say the least, unfortunate that the range of systems encompassed by the term alternate weekly collection have been landed with a name that is cumbersome, bureaucratic and capable of misinterpretation. Nicola Beach of the Essex Waste Partnership thought 'alternate weekly' "a slightly misleading phrase because it implies that the householder is only actually visited every other week and that is not the case; it is actually a weekly collection of waste; and it is just that not all the waste is taken away at once so that I think the phrase the media have picked up on is quite misleading."82 Councillor Paul Bettison offered a simple alternative, used by his Bracknell Forest District Council, of "alternate bin collection", adding that this let them use the slogan "It's as easy as ABC".83 The phrase 'alternate weekly collection' is bureaucratic and confusing, and a good example of how a potentially effective policy can be damaged by jargonistic terminology that is meaningless to most householders. Local councils would do well to find more straightforward descriptions of their own local arrangements.

### Local needs, local choices

51. On 22 May 2007 we took evidence from representatives of three collection authorities and a disposal authority, all of which operated systems particular to their own geographical, social, environmental imperatives, and all of which had stories to tell of successes gained and improvements yet to be won. Councillor Porter, Leader of South Holland District Council, spoke for all in saying, "I think one thing which has clearly come across today is that one solution will not work for local government; we need to have the freedom to be able to pick and choose what works best in our own areas. I think the most reassuring thing from this conversation is that at least we are all different and we do know what is best for our own patches."84 Our clear conclusion on collection methods across England is that there is no single system suitable to all authorities in all the range of local circumstances that pertain.

## Setting a standard

52. Even so, and allowing for the freedom and variety that exist, there is a strong case for moving towards a basic understood standard, if not for collection methods or timings or frequency or type, at least for what the householder who pays, at least in part, for refuse collection through his or her council tax should be able to expect from the local authority. As already mentioned, the Government is developing performance standards through the local government performance framework and has already set minimum recycling targets for authorities. WRAP argues that the move from services based simply around the idea of "collect and dispose" to more variable and complex recycling services, has led to many people losing their understanding of what a good-quality service is and being unsure of what they are entitled to expect of their local authority. It is encouraging the Government

<sup>82</sup> O 154

<sup>83</sup> Q 57

<sup>84</sup> Q 174

to go further, and to set out a core standard, based around the principles of "simplicity, reliability, adequacy, flexibility, effective communication and 'consent first, compulsion last'.85 We recommend that the Government work with the Waste and Resources Action Programme and local government to agree a core definition of what householders should expect from their refuse collection. This should include no complicated rules, rubbish collected when the council says it will be and schemes that suit every household from the largest rural home to the most crowded urban area.

## **Packaging waste**

53. Packaging waste represents nearly a fifth of the refuse householders put in their bins. Packaging from groceries alone is estimated at 5 million tonnes a year.86 Beyond not buying over-packaged goods, there is little that householders themselves can do directly; once the plastic wrapping comes off the meat or the fish, and once the yoghurt in the pot has been eaten, they need to be disposed of somehow. Nor directly can collection authorities, the local councils, do much about packaging once it arrives in dustcarts, except recycle it, burn it or bury it, although they may be able at least to persuade local producers to reduce packaging, through their procurement strategies—for schools, for example—and through their connections and partnerships with local businesses.

54. Reduction of packaging waste lies largely beyond our scope, since the place where it can happen lies a stage back from collection at production by the packagers themselves. The proportion of packaging waste recycled is already higher than for most other types of waste, at between 50 and 60 per cent.87 The EU Packaging Directive requires the 60 per cent figure to be achieved by next year, and regulations require firms to reduce unnecessary packaging and allow for prosecutions—by local trading standards authorities—of those who do not; just four such prosecutions have occurred to date, and the maximum fine possible is only £5,000. The Minister for Waste told us that the Government is pressing for stronger regulations.88 In addition, the Courtauld Commitment, a voluntary agreement involving about 90 per cent, by market share, of the UK's major food producers and supermarkets, requires signatories to design out growth in packaging waste by next March, and to achieve an actual reduction in packaging waste by March 2010. Several retailers which have signed the commitment aim to reduce their own packaging by a quarter by then.89

55. What local authorities can do is inform local residents of how to minimise the waste they send for collection. WRAP has conducted research suggesting that the English public is little aware of the waste hierarchy—reduce, re-use, recycle, recover (as in energy from waste, or incineration) and dispose (as in landfill). One of the perverse outcomes of the welcome, heavy and successful stress on recycling in the past decade has been that the messages on re-using resources without having to smash or crush and then reconstitute them or on simply preventing waste from arising in the first place have been to some

<sup>85</sup> RC 44, Waste and Resources Action Programme memorandum, printed in vol. II

<sup>86</sup> RC 44, Waste and Resources Action Programme memorandum, printed in vol. II

<sup>87</sup> O 213

<sup>88</sup> O 214

RC 44, Waste and Resources Action Programme memorandum, printed in vol. II

RC 44, Waste and Resources Action Programme memorandum, printed in vol. II

extent lost. Essex Waste Partnership neatly made the point that continued overall increases in the amount of waste generated in England display the point that the prevention and minimisation of waste have not been as successfully achieved as the recycling of matter already in the waste stream. Several councils have spoken of a need to change the attitudes of residents so that they accept responsibility for the waste they produce rather than seeing it simply as something the council will come and clear up. If there is such a need, the change can only come from councils themselves, implying that they need to develop programmes to educate, inform and persuade the public of the need to cut household waste. They have argued that they are best placed to choose how, when and what to collect in their local areas; the clear corollary is that they share with central Government the responsibility for persuading their council tax payers how to minimise waste in the first place and how to influence retailers and others.

## Nappies: case study

- 56. Just over 2 per cent of the household waste stream—500,000 tonnes a year—is made up of disposable nappies, which, lending themselves little to recycling or re-use, usually end up in landfill sites. Nappies, of course, need be collected only from houses with babies; rather more surprisingly, they can constitute up to half the residual waste collected from those homes. A number of local authorities have sought to introduce financial and other incentives to encourage parents to prefer non-disposable nappies, and nappy manufacturers have also taken steps to try to reduce the impact used disposable nappies (and other absorbent hygiene products) have.
- 57. Judith Turner told us that the Chartered Institution of Wastes Management hoped to increase debate on the use of reusable nappies: "They are not what they used to be, there are many more options now."92 Nicola Beach of the Essex Waste Partnership told us that disposable nappies were "a tremendous problem with a huge amount going into landfill."93 She outlined the scheme the Partnership has operated for five years, giving out trial packs of nappies to parents and grandparents and working through local maternity units to encourage use of reusable nappies.
- 58. On the other side of the argument, the Absorbent Hygiene Products Manufacturers Association told us that producers had worked to halve the size and volume of disposable nappies over the past two years, reducing the materials used as well as the impact on collection. It also noted that cloth nappies have environmental impacts of their own: "[they] consume considerable amounts of energy, water and detergents. Neither type of nappy has overall environmental superiority."94
- 59. Examples of incentives adopted by councils to reduce the use of disposable nappies are:
  - North London Waste Authority—Seven London boroughs—Barnet, Camden, Hackney, Haringey, Enfield, Islington and Waltham Forest—pay parents £54.15 to encourage the use of cloth nappies. The money may be used towards the cost of washing nappies at home or to subsidise the cost of a nappy laundry collection service. Five of the seven boroughs will also shortly provide parents with redeemable vouchers for the purchase of nappies. Just over 1,400 babies have been registered for the scheme, and NWLA estimates this has meant diversion of 50.9 tonnes of waste.
  - Norfolk County Council—Since 2001, Norfolk has run a scheme that now offers a £30 discount to parents who spend more than £45 on "real" nappies, and sends parents a £10 thank you card after a year in the scheme. Claims are made for about 800 babies each year.

<sup>92</sup> O 28

<sup>94</sup> RC 8, Absorbent Hygiene Products Manufacturers Association memorandum, printed in vol. II

- **Southwark Council**—Parents can receive up to £40 or two months for the price of one with a nappy laundry service if they can prove that they purchase nondisposable nappies. The scheme has operated only since January 2007, and the council is also piloting the use of nappies in nurseries.
- Bexley Borough Council—Residents can receive a trial pack of nappies worth £35, home washing packs and a laundry service trial. People interested in the service are invited to a monthly "Nappachino" to learn about the scheme. Since April 2005, about 250 families have taken part in the scheme, with 70 per cent likely to continue using real nappies.
- WRAP—Real Nappy Campaign has supported 28 local promotional schemes and WRAP believes this avoided 23,000 tonnes of nappies going to landfill.

# 4 Financing waste collection

60. In his report on Local Government in March 2007, Sir Michael Lyons identified rising costs of waste management as one of the central problems facing local authorities in the short and longer terms. Methods of collection may vary widely between neighbouring areas, but when it comes to financial pressures, as Sir Michael noted, "the issues and challenges described by my case study interviewees showed more consistency than any other service area."95 Sir Michael identified the need to divert waste from landfill to meet EU directive targets as a key driver of increased waste management costs. The Government acknowledged the growing cost pressures in its Waste Strategy for England 2007, noting the needs to deal with increasing waste arisings, to fund infrastructure required to divert waste from landfill and to pay increases in the landfill tax (as set out in Chapter 2 above). Waste spending by local authorities in England totalled £1.65 billion in 2001-02 and rose to £2.44 billion in 2005-06. Both the NAO and the LGA report that government modelling suggests spending will have to reach £4.2 billion by 2013, implying a 10 per cent annual growth in funding requirements.<sup>97</sup>

61. Several of those who submitted evidence talked of a growing affordability gap, with Essex Waste Partnership predicting that waste spending may need to increase by between 50 and 100 per cent over the next two decades. 8 Essex's Head of Waste and Recycling, Nicola Beach, told us "we are basically getting waste too cheaply in this country. We do not pay enough for it, we do not realise the environmental costs of it. We have a huge affordability gap".99 The Minister for Waste drew comparisons between UK and EU spending: "We spend as a country 0.6 per cent of our GDP on waste management. That compares with 1 per cent in Germany, 1.2 per cent in the Netherlands. It is about £120 per household, per year now compared with an EU average of about £200 per year, per household."100

62. Significant increases in waste costs for local authorities will almost certainly feed into increased council tax bills for householders. Council tax, contrary to popular perception, does not in fact pay for household refuse collection: local government is funded mainly from central government grant, with council tax making up about a quarter of its financing. The NAO reported that half the public admit to not knowing how much their waste collection and disposal costs; of those who thought they did know, the most popular figure identified was around £200 a year. In fact, the average is around £75 a year per council tax payer. 101 Substantial rises in council tax to pay increasing waste costs are likely to prove politically unpopular.

<sup>95</sup> Sir Michael Lyons, Place-shaping: a shared ambition for the future of local government, March 2007, para. 4.223

<sup>96</sup> DEFRA, Waste Strategy for England 2007, p. 80

<sup>97</sup> RC 31, National Audit Office memorandum, and RC 40, Local Government Association memorandum, both printed

<sup>98</sup> RC 13, Essex Waste Management Partnership memorandum, printed in vol. II

<sup>99</sup> Q 197

<sup>100</sup> Q 249

<sup>101</sup> RC 31, National Audit Office memorandum, printed in vol. II

63. The NAO has also identified one of the biggest potential pressures on council tax—estimated penalties of up to £40 million in 2010 and £205 million in 2013 if EU landfill diversion targets are missed. The LGA estimates that the latter fine would equate to around £220 per household. It also estimated that council tax bills could rise by around £150 if councils fail to meet the challenges set, and the then Minister for Local Government and Community Cohesion, Phil Woolas MP, broadly agreed when we put that figure to him. 104

64. Finally, several witnesses drew attention to the specific pressures rural areas face. Chichester District Council argued that refuse crews can service about 1,000 properties a day in built-up areas, but only 400 to 600 in more rural areas. North Dorset District Council amplified the point: "collection costs in rural districts tend to be above average due to the larger distances involved in collecting and tipping waste and the dispersed nature of the population." Sparse suggested the "rural premium" could be as much as 90 per cent more than the cost of urban collection. 107

65. Having identified increasing waste costs as significant, Sir Michael Lyons made two proposals to ease the pressure. First, he recommended that the Government allow local authorities to form joint waste authorities where they wished, in order that they might benefit from shared costs, efficiency savings and economies of scale. Secondly, he recommended that the Government permit local authorities the power to introduce local variable charges for waste collection if they wished to do so, a practice currently allowed in most EU countries but illegal in the UK. The Government has, while not following Sir Michael's recommendations in full, already acted on both points. Proposals to allow councils to adopt financial incentives will be covered in the next chapter. The subsequent chapter will look at moves towards the formal creation of Joint Waste Authorities.

<sup>102</sup> National Audit Office, Reducing the Reliance on Landfill in England, HC 1177, June 2006

<sup>103</sup> RC 40, Local Government Association memorandum, printed in vol. II

<sup>104</sup> Q 249

<sup>105</sup> RC 3, Chichester District Council memorandum, printed in vol. II

<sup>106</sup> RC 27, North Dorset District Council memorandum, printed in vol. II

<sup>107</sup> RC 42, Sparsity Partnership for AuthoritiesDelivering Rural Services (Sparse) memorandum, printed in vol. II

# **5** Financial incentives and charging

66. UK citizens are unusual within the European Union in paying no direct charge to anyone to have their refuse collected and removed from their homes. Belgians pay a charge for each refuse sack they use. Austrians pay depending on the size of their bins. The Irish pay between 150 and 300 Euro (about £100 to £200) in direct charges. About 84 per cent of the French pay a local waste tax of about £50 each on average. 108 All the rest of the EU 15 states allow local municipalities to charge residents directly. We, on the other hand, contribute towards the cost of local government services directly through our annual council tax bills and indirectly via general taxation, with no specific amount allocated to most individual services, including refuse collection and disposal.

67. Local authorities in England are currently prevented by the Environmental Protection Act 1990 from charging directly for waste collection, although they are allowed to charge for collection of particular items, such as bulky furniture or garden waste. Sir Michael Lyons recommended that this legal prohibition should be overturned to allow councils to charge locally using schemes of their own devising. A charge could be a powerful incentive for householders to reduce waste and recycle and compost more of it. It could also, he said, be seen as a fairer way to spread the costs, with those who produced most waste paying most for its disposal. 109

### **Financial incentive schemes**

68. The Government responded in May in their Waste Strategy for England 2007, but rowed back substantially from what Sir Michael recommended in two respects—by preferring "financial incentive schemes" to "charges", and by insisting that any such scheme should be "revenue-neutral." Launching the Strategy, the then Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, the Rt hon. David Miliband MP announced: "We do not believe that a new tax-raising power for local authorities is the right way forward [...] I am launching today a public consultation on proposals to allow revenueneutral financial incentive schemes to reduce and recycle waste."110 That public consultation is scheduled to end on 16 August 2007 and the Government is expected to legislate in the next parliamentary session.

69. The consultation follows Sir Michael in stressing that whatever incentive schemes are introduced should be as far as possible a matter for local authorities themselves to determine. Both the LGA and the CIWM in supporting the principle of local variable charging emphasised that local authorities should retain both the right to choose whether to bring a scheme in and the right, as far as possible, to set the terms of its own scheme. WRAP was also among the organisations supporting the principle of charging, citing European evidence that direct charging can increase household separation of waste and reduce overall waste.<sup>111</sup> The Government picked up the same point in the Waste Strategy, naming Flanders in Belgium where 98 per cent of municipalities charge residents

<sup>108</sup> RC 58, Greater London Authority memorandum, printed in vol. II

<sup>109</sup> Lyons Inquiry, final report 7.267

<sup>110</sup> HC Deb, 24 May 2007, col 1464

<sup>111</sup> RC 44, Waste and Resources Action Programme memorandum, printed in vol. II

according to the amount of non-recyclable waste they throw out and where the recycling rate of 70 per cent dwarves England's 27 per cent. 112

70. Where the Government differs from Sir Michael, the LGA, the CIWM and more is in sedulously avoiding the word 'charge'. The preferred wording is set out in the Waste Strategy for England 2007: "The Government has concluded that it does not wish to introduce a local variable waste charge, as seen elsewhere in Europe. Instead the Government wishes to allow revenue-neutral financial incentive schemes that encourage recycling and waste prevention without increasing the amount residents as a whole pay to their council [...] High recycling, low waste households would get money back. There would be no overall increase in charges from such a scheme."113

71. The stipulation that schemes will be revenue-neutral means that councils will not immediately be able to raise any additional finance to help them close the funding gap Sir Michael Lyons identified. He believed that "Charging powers in this area would represent a significant new flexibility to manage pressures on budgets according to local preferences."114 This will not be the case with what the Government now propose. In the long term, perhaps, if the schemes work as planned, local authorities will see financial benefits because householders are reducing their waste, meaning less has to be sent to landfill and tax paid on it. The question remains whether local authorities will judge themselves able to achieve the same landfill reductions by other, cheaper means, such as greater local enforcement. In the short term, revenue-neutral financial incentive schemes aimed at improving local recycling will raise no money for councils and will therefore do nothing to help them manage their waste budgets in the face of rising costs. Indeed, since 'revenue-neutral' does not mean 'cost-neutral', and since any scheme introduced by a local authority will require substantial administration and enforcement costs, they may in practice, run directly counter to the intentions Sir Michael Lyons expressed in recommended local charging schemes, by adding a further cost to the growing burden local authorities must carry.

72. The Government's consultation document sets out a model for the sort of scheme it has in mind. Broadly speaking, it anticipates councils setting a flat rebate for every household, say £50, and then, on the basis of the volume of the rubbish collected from each household, billing low-waste homes or high-waste homes. In one indicative example (in which waste would be weighed and bills prepared), "Household A is a low waste house and has disposed of £20-worth of waste. With the £50 rebate, it receives a payment of £30 at the end of the year. Household B is a high waste house disposing of £80 of waste. When the £50 rebate is deducted, the final balance to pay is £30. So household A has gained £30 through the scheme, whereas Household B has lost £30." All the money raised from the schemes would be returned to residents, meeting the Waste Strategy criteria of no overall increase in charges and revenue-neutrality. A key point, however, is that individual residents would gain or lose, and it is hard to see how a resident faced with a 'financial incentive scheme' bill for even the indicative £30 contained in the Government's consultation will see it as anything other than a charge, or a tax. Several of our witnesses

<sup>112</sup> DEFRA, Waste Strategy for England 2007, pp 36-37

<sup>113</sup> DEFRA, Waste Strategy for England 2007, pp 37-38

<sup>114</sup> Sir Michael Lyons, Lyons Inquiry into Local Government, March 2007, para 7.272

raised concern about public reaction to increased charges for a service most feel they pay for already through council tax. Shropshire Waste Partnership, for example, refer to "an adverse reaction from the general public which would be difficult to overcome". 115

73. The Government's consultation document also sets conditions for the introduction of any incentive scheme. Most public attention has been paid to the suggestion that authorities will have to provide recycling for five waste streams—possibly including glass, paper, cans, plastics and food, already the most frequently recycled streams—but the Government will also require them to have in place strategies to alleviate financial pressure on particular groups such as low-income households, large families and pensioners, and to be able to respond to any increase in fly-tipping or dumping as people try to avoid additional payment for their rubbish.

#### Polluter pays principle

74. Those who favour charging or incentive schemes argue strongly that they introduce the "Polluter Pays Principle" into household waste management, and that householders will be encouraged not just to sort their waste, but to begin to reduce how much they throw out by buying fewer goods or concentrating on less-heavily packaged goods. Schemes "have the potential to create a degree of understanding of the link between consumer choice and the type and amount of waste generated as a result," says the CIWM. 116 Charging "is a literal realisation of the polluter pays principle", according to the Campaign for Real Recycling.<sup>117</sup> It "rewards recyclers" by "fining or taxing the lazy", says Cylch Wales Community Recycling Network CRN. 118

75. Evidence is also adduced from elsewhere of changes in behaviour to reduce overall waste while increasing the proportion diverted from landfill by recycling or re-use. Following introduction of a charging system in Maastricht, Netherlands, for example, "the total amount of household waste fell dramatically, described as like going back in time 10 years, and waste separation increased from 45% to 65%."119 The Institute for Public Policy Research and Green Alliance have identified similar stories around the world, citing examples from San Francisco, Japan and New Zealand. 120 Independent waste consultant Professor Chris Coggins adds: "Evidence from other countries (supported by a wealth of research reports) indicates that direct and variable charging for residual waste is a costeffective way to promote change in consumption behaviour and promote recycling".<sup>121</sup>

76. Others identify a parallel with the charges households pay for utilities such as gas, electricity and water or sewerage. The Environment Agency, for instance, questions whether the lack of a direct charge contributes to a general lack of public awareness about how much households actually pay for waste collection and disposal: "Households actually pay around £50-60 each year. [...] By comparison the average household pays more than

<sup>115</sup> RC 34, Shropshire Waste Partnership memorandum, printed in vol. II

<sup>116</sup> CIWM, Direct and Variable Charging for Household Residual Waste, January 2007

<sup>117</sup> RC 38, Campaign for Real Recycling memorandum, printed in vol. II

<sup>118</sup> RC 36, Cylch-Wales Community Recycling Network memorandum, printed in vol. II

<sup>119</sup> RC 58, Greater London Authority memorandum, printed in vol. II

<sup>120</sup> IPPR and Green Alliance, A Zero Waste UK, November 2006

<sup>121</sup> RC 39, Professor Chris Coggins memorandum, printed in vol. II

£150 every year to have their sewage taken away and managed. This lack of awareness may adversely affect public attitudes to waste management in general."122 Indeed, the confusion about how much households really pay is reflected in the figures given there—the NAO, for instance, calculates the average household cost for waste at about £75 a year, while Stephen Didsbury, for the CIWM, put the average household cost of disposal and collection at around £150.123 In short, because waste collection is financed through a mixture of unhypothecated government grant and un-ring-fenced council tax, no-one can say precisely how much each individual householder pays for rubbish collection. To that extent, the introduction of a financial link between the bin being taken and the householder's bank balance may be welcome.

#### **Gainers and losers**

77. That welcome may, however, be somewhat limited on other grounds. First, even if the Government succeeds in encouraging councils to introduce incentive schemes, the sums a householder may gain for even the most spectacular waste diversion and recycling will be comparatively small. The indicative example given above from the consultation document on incentive schemes offers £20 and £30 a year as likely sums. When we put the former figure to the Minister for Waste, he confirmed it was "in the right kind of ballpark." He also said: "You are absolutely right to say that we are not talking about huge amounts of money here [...] Where these systems operate, they tend to make a difference of tens of pounds in what people pay."124 Two other witnesses, Ian Davies from Hammersmith and Fulham Borough Council, and Gary Alderson of Mid-Beds District Council were sceptical about how far such a sum would encourage real changes of behaviour: "residents will be so disappointed with the rebate", said Mr Alderson. 125 But Councillor Paul Bettison gave the example of supermarket loyalty cards as something that changed individual purchasing habits in return for comparatively small financial rewards, and the Minister for Waste was optimistic, too: "a little bit of money can be an incentive to people. If people think that they are saving 50 pence or a pound a week or a month by recycling, that has in the experience of those countries [that have incentives] acted as an important incentive to get their recycling rates up."126

78. The other side of the smallish coin to be gained by householders is the fact that some will lose. The Government's language on incentive schemes displays a deep desire to avoid the idea that people will be "charged" for not recycling or reducing their waste. The implication of a revenue-neutral scheme introduced by a local authority is that everyone who gets a few pounds back will have to be balanced by someone else paying a few pounds more. As has already been canvassed thoroughly, there is considerable confusion across England about how waste is paid for, but one point stands out: for very many people, the collection of rubbish is one of the most visible and important things their local council does for them, and that is what the council tax pays for: "charges for the collection of waste from households would be regarded as an extra tax", says the National Association of

<sup>122</sup> RC 28, Environment Agency memorandum, printed in vol. II

<sup>123</sup> RC 31, National Audit Office memorandum, printed in vol. II, and Q 42

<sup>124</sup> O 258

<sup>125</sup> QQ 191 and 192

<sup>126</sup> QQ 61 and 258

Residents' Associations. 127 Cambridgeshire County Council and Shropshire Waste Partnership both raise the spectre of unpopularity among the public. 128 The Campaign for Real Recycling fears householders may contaminate recycling by diverting as much as possible from the residual waste bin they have to pay a charge on.<sup>129</sup> None of the collection authorities we took evidence from unequivocally supported charging; administrative costs, complexity and local popular reaction were the main reasons given. North Dorset District Council summed up a prevalent view, agreeing with the idea in principle but ruling it out on grounds of administrative cost.<sup>130</sup> Indeed, Councillor Paul Bettison, who spearheaded the LGA's campaign for local authorities to have the freedom to introduce charging, and who leads Bracknell Forest council said much the same: "I am in favour of local authorities having that power. If you are asking whether, if we had the power, I would use it in my authority, the answer would have to be that I do not think I would". 131 The Government's decision to allow local authorities to run the schemes is consistent with the desire to devolve authority. We must question, however, whether the schemes as proposed will translate that desire into practical action. Councils need to avoid paying landfill tax or to meet decreasing landfill allowances, and there are long-term benefits to be gained from schemes that encourage householders to throw out less and to sort what remains. Even so, it is hard to see why any council will want to set up a complicated charging scheme that earns it no money and risks widespread public disapproval.

79. How any new incentive scheme will mesh with council tax remains unclear. In initially pushing for councils to have a power to charge, the Local Government Association argued that charges should be accompanied by a council tax reduction. The Government's consultation on incentive schemes suggests such schemes should run separately from council tax and "should not require any additional funding from council tax". 132 The Local Government Minister told us: "It is possible of course that the incentive schemes will appear in the form of a rebate on the [council tax] bill, but it will not be part of the council tax calculation. Running the schemes though council tax billing could reduce some of the administrative cost, but would merely draw more attention to the fact that those who do not recycle or reduce their waste enough are being made to pay more than they already do for it. A significant complexity arises, too, if the schemes are to be revenue-neutral but included in council tax bills: the need to maintain revenue neutrality means that the amount of rebate/charge for each householder cannot be calculated until the end of the year, and cannot therefore be included in the council tax bill issued at the start of the year. Delayed reward, included in the next year's council tax bill, surely reduces the link between recycling and reward, and conversely between failing to do so and being penalised. Finally, including the rebates in council tax bills would also raises questions about council tax benefit: would poor households receiving a rebate see their council tax benefit cut to match it, and would a household that didn't earn a recycling rebate have its deduction paid for entirely from benefit? We recommend that the Government clarify how financial

<sup>127</sup> RC 2. National Organisation of Residents Associations memorandum, printed in vol. II

<sup>128</sup> RC 26, Cambridgeshire County Council memorandum, and RC 34, Shropshire Waste Partnership memorandum, both printed in vol. II

<sup>129</sup> RC 38, Campaign for Real Recycling memorandum, printed in vol. II

<sup>130</sup> RC 27, North Dorset District Council memorandum, printed in vol. II

<sup>131</sup> Q 67

<sup>132</sup> DEFRA, Consultation on the Incentives for Recycling by Households, May 2007, p. 18

incentive schemes for recycling will interact with council tax. We seek a detailed explanation of why the introduction of incentive schemes should not be accompanied by reductions in council tax. In particular, we are concerned by the suggestion that schemes "should not" require additional funding from council tax. Whether a local authority raises or reduces its council tax to fund schemes or incentives to local householders is a matter for individual councils.

#### Costs of incentives: administration, fly-tipping and bin-chipping

80. It is generally accepted that the returns to householders from incentive schemes will be comparatively small. Some of those who have submitted evidence fear, however, that even estimates of £30 a household may prove optimistic once the costs of administering an incentive scheme and responding to any increase in fly-tipping or dumping have been taken into account. Stephen Didsbury, for the Chartered Institution of Wastes Management, said there would be "significant administration problems around how you go about the administration of the billing, the debt collection". 133 Gary Alderson, for Mid-Beds District Council, estimated set-up costs of £500,000 plus ongoing administrative costs of £100,000 to £150,000 a year to manage the system. 134

81. Further costs are implied by the possibility of householders attempting to avoid paying any additional charge. Three concerns are generally raised: fly-tipping, householders dumping rubbish in their neighbours' bins, and increased backyard burning of refuse.

82. The Environment Agency says that fly-tipping costs local authorities around £50 million a year in collection and prosecution costs, and that more than half of fly-tips involve household refuse sacks and household waste. 135 DEFRA and DCLG jointly confirm that 545,000 incidents involved black bags and other household waste, and that £20 million was spent on enforcement in the first nine months of 2006-07. The number of prosecutions for fly-tipping rose by 45 per cent between 2003 and 2005, and the Clean Neighbourhoods and Environment Act 2005 gave authorities new powers to introduce fixed-penalty notices as an alternative to prosecution.<sup>137</sup> Launching the 2007 Waste Strategy, the Environment Secretary said the recent doubling of prosecutions for flytipping could mean "either that there is much more fly-tipping or that the authorities are getting better at prosecution."138 The resulting consultation on financial incentive schemes specifies: "Government would require any authority introducing a scheme to have in place a good fly-tipping prevention strategy, including robust enforcement measures". 139

83. Experience from other countries tends to suggest that the introduction of any charging scheme is closely followed, at least in the short term, by a rise in fly-tipping of waste. The Environment Agency offers the conflicting examples of Denmark, which did suffer a small but short-lived increase in fly-tipping, and Germany where no increase in illegal disposal

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133 Q 38
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<sup>134</sup> OO 191 and 193

<sup>135</sup> RC 28, Environment Agency memorandum, printed in vol. II

<sup>136</sup> RC 47, DEFRA and DCLG joint memorandum, printed in vol. II

<sup>137</sup> CIWM, Direct and Variable Charging for Household Residual Waste, January 2007

<sup>138</sup> HC Deb, 24 May 2007, col. 1474

<sup>139</sup> DEFRA, Consultation on the Incentives for Recycling by Households, May 2007, p. 20

was reported. The Environmental Services Association gives the example of Ireland. 140 The Irish Environmental Protection Agency reported in January 2007 that up to a quarter of Irish households were disposing illegally of rubbish. 141

84. ENCAMS reports that 70 per cent of fly-tipping dealt with by local authorities happened in 88 of the most deprived neighbourhoods. This implies, it says, that those already disadvantaged areas may be disproportionately affected by any increase in tipping.<sup>142</sup> The Association of Charity Shops has also raised the possibility that charging could mean "fly-tipping by stealth" as householders attempt to keep waste out of their bins by effectively dumping on the third sector unwanted items that councils don't recycle. 143

#### Weight-based schemes and volume-based schemes

85. The prospect of disputes among neighbours over refuse has also been raised as a significant concern, and the Government's consultation on incentive schemes refers to the need for prevention measures, possibly including lockable bins.<sup>144</sup> To a significant degree, this depends on the collection strategies authorities choose when introducing schemes. In short, there are two basic choices: charging by the weight of the refuse collected or charging by its volume. Under the second system, a flat charge is made for each bin, bag or box collected. In parts of Belgium, for example, householders pay 1.2 Euro (about 75p) for each bag of residual waste with smaller charges attaching to bags for recyclable waste. 145 The advantage of volume schemes is simplicity: every receptacle for waste has a fixed charge attached to it. The disadvantages are that for rigid container-type schemes, once a decision to pay for a larger bin has been made the week-by-week pressure to constrain the amount of waste put out is low. Sack-based schemes preserve the pressure for restraint but can have the disadvantages discussed above of encouraging vermin and animals to break bags waiting to be collected.

86. Weight-based schemes more precisely tie the charge paid to the amount of refuse produced by a household. In other parts of Belgium, for example, householders pay around 12 to 15 eurocents (about 10p) for each kilo of waste. The difficulty with such systems is the cost of providing weighing equipment and the increased complexity of collecting refuse. With a volume system, the refuse collector picks up each bag and throws it in the back of the dustcart; weight-based systems require on-board equipment to calculate how much is in each bin and chips in the bins to provide information for the final bill. The Bradford-based PM Group, a commercial company that sells weighing equipment, argues that "an elderly couple with minimal waste will not have to pay as much as a large family [...] the environmentally conscious are not paying through the council tax for those who refuse to recycle or seek to reduce their waste." But PM also predicts it would take a council an average seven years to recoup the costs of introducing weight-based technology: "Each bin chip costs around £1.20 to buy and install, while the fitting of the weighing equipment to vehicles and IT support costs approximately £15,000

<sup>140</sup> RC 17, Environmental Services Association memorandum, printed in vol. II

<sup>141</sup> Sunday Times, 14 January 2007

<sup>142</sup> RC 37, ENCAMS memorandum, printed in vol. II

<sup>143</sup> RC 19, Association of Charity Shops memorandum, printed in vol. II

<sup>144</sup> DEFRA, Consultation on the Incentives for Recycling by Households, May 2007, p. 21

<sup>145</sup> BP 9, Memorandum from British Embassy in Belgium

per vehicle. An estimated cost for a fleet size of 20 vehicles, servicing 280,000 people, might be £350,000 [...] Overall the capital costs should be recouped after seven years." 146

87. Some witnesses raised other practical concerns about weight-based systems. Ian Davies, for Hammersmith and Fulham Borough Council, said the equipment was "relatively fragile, it breaks quite easily", as the council discovered when using some to survey local recycling levels.<sup>147</sup> The City of Lincoln also expressed concerns about the "robustness" of weighing equipment and chips, adding that lockable bins could unacceptably reduce collection productivity.

88. Weight-based systems raise further difficulties in areas characterised largely by shared accommodation such as blocks of flats, where charges may have to be averaged out across a number of households, breaking the principle that those who throw most waste out pay the most.

89. As is the case throughout refuse policy, there is no 'right' scheme: local circumstances and preferences will dictate which, if either, type of system individual local authorities choose to employ. To return, however, to the concern about neighbours dumping rubbish in each other's bins, it is clear that the possibility exists and will need to be policed wherever any financial incentive is introduced. Even for councils that choose not to invest substantial capital sums in weighing equipment and lockable bins, there will be additional costs associated with ensuring that charges for refuse attach to those who create it. The Government recognises the risk that new financial incentive schemes to increase recycling and minimise waste may result in more fly-tipping or in people attempting to cut their bills by putting their rubbish in their neighbours' bins. We are not convinced that enough work has been done or guidance given to local authorities on how to prevent such risks from blighting areas and causing disputes. Nor are we convinced that local authorities already faced with increasing waste costs will be adequately funded to deal with increased administration, clear-up and prosecution costs.

#### **Exemptions**

90. In recommending that charging be allowed, Sir Michael Lyons argued that "a poorly thought out variable charging scheme would have the capacity to impact most harshly on those people least able to afford it, particularly young families."148 The same applies to financial incentive schemes, and the Government specifies council tax benefit recipients and families with young children, the elderly and people with disabilities among those whom any proposed scheme will have to avoid disadvantaging. 149 We welcome the Government's recognition that specific groups, such as large families or those on council tax benefit, should not be disadvantaged by the introduction of financial incentive schemes for increased recycling and waste reduction.

<sup>148</sup> Lyons Inquiry, final report, para. 7.267

#### Can't pay, won't pay?

91. A final question arises: What will happen to those who refuse to pay additional charges for failing to increase their recycling or reduce their waste? The Environmental Services Association drew a direct parallel with council tax itself: "local authorities failed to collect 3.2% of council taxes in 2005/06 and if operators were asked to collect charges, the question would arise as to whether operators would be obligated to serve households which had not paid."150 When asked whether councils would collect the refuse of those who refused to pay, Councillor Paul Bettison, chairman of the LGA's environment board, simply said it would be up to local authorities to decide how to handle the matter.<sup>151</sup> We believe that more thought may be required. Non-payment of council tax may involve sums of £1,500 or £2,000, making prosecution at least feasible. If, as the Local Government Minister suggested, incentive scheme payments were to be administered through council tax bills, the sum involved in non-payment of the whole bill would be big enough to justify enforcement through the courts. If incentive schemes are to be based around giving or taking from householders sums of £20 or £30 a year, and this is separate from council tax it is unlikely that many local authorities will wish to incur the costs of prosecuting those who refuse to pay. Nor is leaving the rubbish uncollected a feasible option, not least because of the impact on those nearby householders who have paid and who have had their rubbish removed. This also leads us to believe that the relationship of any incentive charge to council tax benefit must be clarified; a household on maximum benefits might be left to pay only the incentive charge, or were the incentive eligible for benefit, might have any incentive payment they would otherwise receive taken away from them. We see significant cost benefits in using the council tax collection system to operate any incentive scheme but fail to see how it will be possible for council tax bills issued in March each year to include an adjustment for a revenue-neutral charge. That charge could be calculated only after the end of the financial year, once councils can calculate how many gainers and losers there are and how much has been gained or lost in the light of the amount of residual waste collected. Finally, of course, administering an incentive scheme through the council tax bill, though arguably the most financially efficient way to do it, would significantly lessen the impact of the schemes by breaking the "polluter pays" principle that justifies their introduction in the first place: burying a £20 or £30 incentive gain or charge in a council tax bill of perhaps £1,200 to £2,500 would simply make the incentives invisible and therefore pointless. The Government needs to clarify what will happen to householders who refuse to pay additional charges levied under any new financial incentive scheme. Given the small sums involved, prosecution seems an unlikely answer. Given the impact on other householders, councils cannot be allowed not to collect rubbish left out by non-payers. We are unconvinced that councils possess any adequate sanction against refusal to pay and question whether that might not substantially undermine schemes that local authorities may wish to introduce.

#### Rewarding effort?

92. Earlier we criticised councils for mistakenly using unnecessarily obscure language alternate weekly collection—that may have had a counterproductive effect in making a potentially effective idea unpopular. The Government, perhaps rather more consciously, seeks to avoid unpopularity by using "revenue-neutral financial incentive scheme" to mean something that those who end up paying extra will see as a charge or, more probably, a tax. We have already drawn attention to the disparity between the actual importance of the 7 per cent of the waste stream that household waste represents and the remarkably strong reaction rubbish collection can provoke among the public. The sums involved in financial incentive schemes are so minimal—£20 or £30 a year— that their impact on behaviour is likely to be equally negligible, if any council is willing to bear the probable costs and public opprobrium. Yet the impact on public perception of any increase in the amount people pay for a service they already receive through taxation may well be the opposite.

93. The positive case for waste charging is underpinned by notions of fairness—the single pensioner not subsidising the flat full of students, each of us paying for what we throw away—and of establishing a link between what individual tax payers pay and the service they receive for it, as with utilities such as gas and electricity, or water. The financial incentive schemes proposed by the Government offer individual householders very little reward for good behaviour and offer councils no immediate financial incentive. We cannot believe that giving some households £20 or £30 a year will remotely outweigh the negative psychological impact of making other households pay more for a service they believe they already pay for through taxation. Breaking the link with council tax and establishing refuse collection as a utility, like gas or sewerage, might have the radical impact the Government say they want. The half-hearted tilt in the direction of charging contained in their current proposals will not.

### **6** Joint waste authorities

94. The Government proposes, in the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Bill, expected to become law later in 2007, to allow for the creation of Joint Waste Authorities where several authorities desire formal co-operative arrangements.

95. In practice, many collection and disposal authorities already operate partnership arrangements, often including formal memoranda of understanding, although they are not at present, except in London, constituted as legal entities. In London, four statutory joint waste disposal authorities have existed since the Greater London Council was abolished. Among those who submitted evidence to us, councils in Lincolnshire, Essex, Buckinghamshire, Shropshire and Cambridgeshire already work together across local authority boundaries. To take just one example of the benefits claimed, the Waste Partnership for Buckinghamshire says: "Joint working has existed amongst the local authorities in Buckinghamshire for over 10 years and has been a key factor in securing external funding that has enabled the kerbside collection service to expand and deliver the current recycling rates and successes."152 The LGA notes: "Joint working has potential benefits in generating efficiency savings through economies of scale, purchasing power, technological expertise, asset management, IT infrastructure". 153 The North London Waste Authority (NLWA), which includes seven boroughs, confirms that 'joined-up' financial management "eases" joint working arrangements.<sup>154</sup> The Government identifies further potential benefits from "cost efficiencies through joint procurement for collection contracts, single collection contract across a number of authorities, opportunities to share waste facilities, trucks and staff; and more joined-up services within and across local areas."155

96. In spite of the general welcome for the idea, however, two issues have emerged during our inquiry. First, some councils have identified difficulties in achieving co-operative arrangements. Secondly, concerns have been expressed about the democratic accountability of larger authorities. The latter concern was comprehensively dismissed by the LGA's Programme Director, Martin Wheatley: "the people who run it are democratically elected, accountable members of the local authorities who make up the [joint waste] authority [...] It will be answerable to the authorities who have got together to form it."156

97. The difficulties of achieving co-operation are slightly more complex. City of Lincoln Council and East Lindsey Council described an attempt at joint procurement with three other authorities which foundered because of problems involving differing direct labour organisations and the transfer of undertakings. Questions of how costs would be allocated also proved insuperable. 157 Chichester District Council, while saying it had benefited from

<sup>152</sup> RC 10, Waste Partnership for Buckinghamshire memorandum, printed in vol. II

<sup>153</sup> RC 40, Local Government Association memorandum, printed in vol. II

<sup>154</sup> RC 60, North London Waste Authority memorandum, printed in vol. II

<sup>155</sup> RC 47, DEFRA and DCLG joint memorandum, printed in vol. II

<sup>156</sup> OO 85-86

<sup>157</sup> RC 1, City of Lincoln District Council memorandum, and RC 5, East Lindsey District Council memorandum, both printed in vol. II

local co-operative arrangements, also questioned whether large county-wide contracts might not negatively affect local responsiveness and flexibility.<sup>158</sup> The LGA, while favouring the possibility of joint authorities, also warned that the "difficulties of establishing such arrangements should not however be underestimated."<sup>159</sup> Nevertheless, we conclude that the introduction of a power allowing councils to form joint authorities where they wish to do so is welcome. No authority will be required to do so, and no authority will be required to enter a partnership that follows collection or disposal strategies markedly different from its own preferred local options. The proposal to allow joint authorities adds to the tools available to local collection and disposal authorities without reducing their autonomy to act as they see fit.

98. WRAP, however, highlighted the need for local authorities to "give up some of their autonomy" if the expected cost savings are to materialise. "For example, if a consortium of authorities procures identical bins, there are likely to be cost savings due to the economies of scale. However, if each authority reserves the right to specify the type, size and colour of the bins used in their areas, these savings are unlikely to materialise in practice." <sup>160</sup>

99. A running theme of this report has been the cornucopia of differing collection and disposal authorities, systems and strategies in place in England. We referred earlier to a long-term aspiration towards greater consistency of approach without reducing the autonomy of local authorities better placed than central Government to identify and implement the best means of collection in their areas. In spite of the difficulties that some authorities may experience, the move towards greater joint working will be even more welcome if it brings about cost efficiencies, an increasing degree of shared practice and, possibly, some standardisation of approach to collection of different recycling streams and such things as a colour-coded system for different streams.

## **7** Waste planning

100. The waste hierarchy emphasises reduction, re-use and recycling as environmentally preferable options to disposal for dealing with waste, and much of the foregoing relates to central and local government's efforts to improve the part played by each of those three approaches. Nevertheless, and in spite of the drive to reduce dramatically the amount of waste being sent to landfill, the role of incineration within England's waste management activities is likely substantially to increase in the coming decade. The Minister for Waste told us "there is no doubt that we will have to increase the level of waste to energy in this country from about 10 per cent at the moment to 25 per cent. It will still be far lower than most other European countries and lower than we thought it would have to be in the Waste Strategy 2000 because we have done so well on recycling."161

101. DCLG is responsible for the planning process through which applications for the facilities required to meet that increase from 10 per cent to 25 per cent will have to go. Incinerators are both expensive for those who construct them and unpopular among those near whom they are built. Their presence may also have an impact on local authority strategies to reduce, reuse or recycle waste, particularly if they offer a cheap alternative or if an incineration contract requires the incinerator to be 'fed'. The Environment Secretary, in launching the Waste Strategy for England 2007, said that a major step to achieving the Government's waste reduction objectives would be investment in infrastructure to collect, sort, reprocess and treat waste.<sup>162</sup> Those facilities will include MRFs, anaerobic digesters and associated combined heat and power plant, and incinerators, and the NAO has predicted that meeting EU landfill targets will require about 15 million tonnes of new waste processing capacity. 163 The LGA anticipates £10 billion worth of investment being required to build mechanical and biological treatment plants, incinerators and other treatment and recovery facilities, and the Office of Government Commerce reported that as many as 50 waste management contracts would need to be let every year for the next four years to meet demand. 164 Biffa Waste Services, one of the country's largest private waste management firms, believes we are already two or three years behind schedule on building capacity to meet the EU's landfill diversion targets. 165

102. Planning policy on waste is governed by Planning Policy Statement 10 (PPS 10) Planning for Sustainable Waste Management, and it is likely that changes will emerge in the light of the White Paper Planning for a Sustainable Future issued by DCLG in May 2007. Our evidence has highlighted the difficulties of obtaining planning permission for major facilities. The Environmental Services Association is unequivocal: "Obtaining planning permission for new treatment and recovery facilities continues to be a major constraint to development of new infrastructure within the UK [...] there has been little evidence that planning for waste management facilities has become more straightforward."166 The LGA, too, notes the difficulty of obtaining planning permission,

<sup>161</sup> Q 273

<sup>162</sup> HC Deb, 24 May 2007, col. 1463

<sup>163</sup> NAO, Reducing the reliance on Landfill in England, HC 1177, 26 July 2006

<sup>164</sup> RC 40, Local Government Association memorandum, printed in vol. II

<sup>165</sup> RC 33, Biffa Waste Services Ltd memorandum, printed in vol. II

<sup>166</sup> RC 17, Environmental Services Association memorandum, printed in vol. II

but adds that public opposition is another major barrier. <sup>167</sup> Recent changes to the private finance initiative have involved reconsideration of commercial wastes and the grant of PFI credits to contracts for residual waste treatment facilities. Opinion on their efficacy has been mixed: WRAP welcomes the changes because excluding collection from PFI deals means not tying in arrangements for up to 25 years; the LGA, on the other hand, says the changes have caused further delays, although it accepts they may bring longer-term benefits. <sup>168</sup> The Government has made it clear that substantial infrastructure development will be necessary if waste diversion targets are to be met in the coming decades. In its coming implementation of the proposals in its planning White Paper, the Department for Communities and Local Government will need carefully to balance the desire for simplification in the obtaining of planning permission for major wasterelated infrastructure projects with the objections of local communities to new facilities, including incinerators, desired by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs to boost energy-from-waste production from its current 10 per cent to 25 per cent.

103. Having passed through planning into operation, waste treatment facilities further impact on local waste management policies and strategies. East Lindsey District Council raised the "real risk" that the presence of an energy from waste plant might be a disincentive to schemes to promote and encourage recycling.<sup>169</sup> Certainly, the presence, or otherwise, of facilities within a local area will determine the extent to which a local authority adopts any particular disposal strategy, but this concern seems over-stated. A further concern raised was the need to 'feed' energy from waste facilities once built: as WRAP notes, highly capital intensive plants such as incinerators may require between 12 and 18 years of operation to pay back their investment. 170 Once again, the presence of such a facility, potentially offering both an immediately cheaper disposal option than recycling and a need to keep it going to fulfil a return on investment may affect local authority choices on how to dispose of waste. This is a real concern, although the need to more than double England's energy from waste may reduce it in the early stages. In the medium term, those authorities that decide to invest in producing more energy from waste will need to develop strategies to send only unrecyclable material for incineration and to use the flexibility in the Landfill Allowances Trading Scheme to trade incineration capacity with other authorities who may otherwise find it difficult to reduce their landfill to the extent required.

<sup>167</sup> RC 40, Local Government Association memorandum, printed in vol. II

<sup>168</sup> RC 44, Waste and Resources Action Programme memorandum, and RC 40, Local Government Association memorandum, both printed in vol. II

<sup>169</sup> RC 5, East Lindsey District Council memorandum, printed in vol. II

<sup>170</sup> RC 44, Waste and Resources Action Programme memorandum, printed in vol. II

## 8 Waste statistics and London

104. London, as in so many things, differs markedly from the rest of England in several respects to do with waste policy. The size of its population matched with its housing mix and particular political arrangements all contribute to making it hard to compare practice in the capital with that elsewhere. London's recycling rates are substantially worse than the English averages, and the proportion of non-household waste in London's municipal waste total—that is, the amount of commercial waste London's 37 collection authorities are required to collect—is approximately double the English average. John Duffy, the Environment Policy Director for the Mayor of London, told us non-household waste represents about 21 per cent of the city's municipal waste (the national average being about 11 per cent), and that just 9 per cent of that is recycled (the national average being 30 per cent of non-household municipal waste).<sup>171</sup>

105. A simple point emerges: London both collects more commercial waste and recycles a smaller proportion of it than is the case elsewhere in England. That means in turn that London sends more commercial waste to landfill, not just in absolute but in proportional terms, which gives London's boroughs an additional financial pressure in paying landfill tax and meeting the limits set under the Landfill Allowances Trading Scheme (LATS). The Mayor of London contends that some boroughs are easing that pressure by exploiting a loophole in LATS that allows them to make paper reductions in the amount of waste classed as municipal waste going to landfill, in spite of the fact that the waste itself still heads for holes in the ground.

106. The LATS scheme sets an annual landfill allowance for each local authority; those authorities that exceed their allowances face substantial fines; those that under-use their allowance may either trade their excess allowance with other authorities or bank it for their own future use. Local authorities are legally required to collect all household waste, and to collect commercial waste where requested to do so, and the fact that London authorities are asked to collect more than others gives them the potential problem of filling more landfill space with it. The Mayor's case is that some boroughs have found ways to avoid collecting that commercial waste, therefore removing it from out of their landfill figures. The waste still goes to landfill, he contends, but is classed instead as private sector commercial waste, which is not subject to LATS.

107. The Mayor's case is twofold: some boroughs, he said, are "meeting their LATS targets by selling off their commercial waste portfolios or by pricing themselves out of the [commercial waste collection] market."172 He backed this case with figures showing that several London collection authorities had dramatically reduced the amounts of nonhousehold waste that they collect: the City of London, for example, cut its collected nonhousehold waste from 64,830 tonnes in 2000-01 to 39,252 tonnes in 2005-06; and Kingston, which collected 15,405 tonnes in 2000-01 collected none at all in 2005-06. The Minister for Waste has confirmed that London's reported non-household waste fell by 17 per cent in one year between 2004-05 and 2005-06.<sup>173</sup>

108. The Mayor argued, therefore, that the apparent reduction in municipal waste sent to landfill was "little more than a paper exercise, whilst in reality that is still being sent to landfill", a contention he backed by drawing attention to Environment Agency data showing that total waste disposed of to nine landfill sites in the south-east had increased from 6.2 million tonnes in 2003 to 7.6 million tonnes in 2005.<sup>174</sup> He further argued that authorities that have sold their non-household collection portfolios to private collection companies should still report figures for collection, under the Environmental Protection Act 1990.

109. London Councils, rebutting the Mayor's case, agreed that commercial waste collected by private sector organisations on behalf of local authorities should still be recorded as municipal waste, but said boroughs were fully aware of and meeting that obligation. Responsibility for checking that they are rests with the Environment Agency, and the Minister for Waste told us that it will audit 24 authorities by the end of June 2007, some of which are in London, and will audit all authorities by 2009. "If they discover the kind of problems that have been alleged to exist, we will take appropriate action, including the potential options to impose penalties and/or suspend authorities from LATS trading", he said.<sup>175</sup> Subsequently, the Minister told us that the Environment Agency was pursuing the point with the Mayor.<sup>176</sup> London Councils also argued that the rise in total waste could simply reflect an increase in total commercial waste to landfill rather than demonstrating a transfer of commercial waste away from the municipal waste system.<sup>177</sup> The Minister for Waste also said the Mayor's comparison was "misleading [...] as the figures given relate to <u>all</u> waste going to those landfill sites (not just that from London) and there will also be other landfill site receiving waste from London". 178 In fact, the Minister himself had used precisely the same figures in answering on 6 June a parliamentary question from out Chair, but unlike the Mayor, who had specifically said they were figures for total waste going to the nine landfill sites specified, mistakenly identified them as figures for Greater London alone. Whether all or any of the 1.4 million tonne increase in the total landfill does or does not include more municipal waste from London is therefore unclear, and the episode highlights the difficulty of obtaining accurate statistics from DEFRA.

110. On the Mayor's second point, authorities may, unlike with households at present, charge firms for commercial collection, and setting prices higher than those offered by private collection firms could, at least in theory, be a way to avoid having to collect private waste. The Minister for Waste dismissed the Mayor's suggestion that any London boroughs are acting in this way: "We are not aware that any London authorities are knowingly pricing themselves out of the commercial waste sector". The NLWA,

<sup>173</sup> RC 61, DEFRA memorandum, printed in vol. II

<sup>174</sup> RC 61, DEFRA memorandum, printed in vol. II, and HC Deb, 6 June 2007, col. 555-56W

<sup>175</sup> Q 284

<sup>176</sup> RC 61, DEFRA memorandum, printed in vol. II

<sup>177</sup> RC 59, London Councils memorandum, printed in vol. II

<sup>178</sup> RC 61, DEFRA memorandum, printed in vol. II

<sup>179</sup> Q 283

however, said that it had been forced to add a "LATs premium" to its charges for nonhousehold waste collection, which may go some way to explaining why some authorities are charging higher prices.<sup>180</sup>

111. The Mayor of London alleges that some London boroughs are making merely paper reductions in the amount of waste sent to landfill, exploiting a loophole in the LATS scheme. London Councils rebuts his argument saying that the figures used are misleading. The Minister for Waste accepts that the amount of non-household waste reported in London by local authorities between 2004-05 and 2005-06 fell by 17 per cent, but points out that total municipal waste drops in London match figures elsewhere in the country and that some of the non-household decrease may be accounted for by changes in reporting requirements.<sup>181</sup> We recommend that the Environment Agency prioritise the audit of London local authorities in its current waste disposal audit programme, because of the higher-than-average proportion of non-household waste collected and disposed of in the capital. We recommend that the Government ensure that reported reductions in municipal waste being sent from the capital to landfill sites are in fact occurring. If a loophole does exist in the current reporting requirement, it must be closed forthwith.

112. Whatever the rights and wrongs of the dispute between the Mayor and the Government, what underpins the argument about municipal and commercial waste is a point underlying our inquiry: that household waste, for all its high profile, represents a small proportion of our total waste stream, and that the strong emphasis placed on household sorting, recycling and reduction can ultimately make only a small contribution to dealing with the waste produced in England. Our inquiry has focused on what local government can do, and therefore on municipal waste. It is worth remembering that ninetenths of England's waste falls outside our scope, as the argument about whether commercial waste collected by councils, or by private operators organised by councils, or by private operators beyond councils highlights. The fact that attention focuses so strongly on household waste—on dustbins and collection—allows the vast majority of our waste almost to elude attention. There is a significant need to focus more on routine waste produced by businesses, especially small and medium-sized ones, and to find imaginative ways to deal with waste, such as, for example, the huge number of bottles and glasses disposed of by restaurants and pubs.

113. The dramatic improvements made by local authorities over the past decade have been driven by landfill tax and the introduction of LATS, with the threat of substantial fines and the probability of extremely unpopular council tax increases for councils which fail to act promptly to reduce waste being sent to landfill. Much work has been done with supermarkets and the wider private sector on agreements to reduce waste growth and diversion to landfill. But, like being hanged in the morning, the threat of financial penalty concentrates the mind wonderfully. With the bulk of England's waste far beyond the control of local councils, we recommend that the Government urgently investigate means of improving financial incentives to reduce the amount of commercial, industrial and construction waste that will otherwise continue to fill our rapidly diminishing landfill space. We recommend the rapid roll-out of a programme of affordable recycling services for businesses, especially small and medium-sized enterprises.

## Conclusions and recommendations

- 1. We endorse the Government's clear indication that it intends to include measures on waste among the 200 indicators being developed for the new local government performance framework. Given refuse collection's significance and high public profile, we recommend that such indicators be priorities for inclusion among the 35 'local improvement targets' identified for each authority. (Paragraph 20)
- 2. We endorse the autonomy of local authorities and recognise their expertise in implementing the best solutions for their own areas. The problems posed by waste collection and disposal are not, however, confined within local governmental boundaries, and require a national response driven by a clear vision energetically communicated from central Government. We recommend that the Government commission research to evaluate the best local collection, recycling, re-use and reduction schemes operated by local authorities and to develop a strategy to encourage their widespread adoption. (Paragraph 23)
- Given the sensitivity of local opinion when it comes to changes in the ways refuse is 3. collected, we recommend that the Government develop clear, straightforward best practice guidance on information provision to householders, using examples both of those local authorities that have introduced alternate weekly collection systems without prompting local concern and those who have, in the words of the Minister for Waste, "blundered into introducing alternate weekly collections without proper consultation, without proper planning". (Paragraph 31)
- 4. Up to one third of food purchased is disposed of without being eaten, perhaps the most shocking example of utter waste revealed during our inquiry. Householders are throwing away £400 a year. Councils are forced to waste their time and our money clearing up our leftovers, which are often the most problematic part of domestic waste. We recommend that Government set specific targets for food waste reduction and follow through on the Waste and Resources Action Programme's autumn food waste information campaign by promoting some simple measures households can take such as menu planning and improved storage, and by encouraging supermarkets and other retailers to help customers avoid waste by, for example, packaging perishable goods in sizes suitable for both single and family households. (Paragraph 35)
- We recognise that research conducted to date into the health impacts of alternate 5. weekly collection systems has found no evidence of adverse health impacts. Given the strength of public concern, however, allied with the wealth of anecdotal evidence about increased populations of flies, maggots, rats and other vermin associated with AWC systems, we strongly recommend that the Government commission further and more detailed research if the public is to be persuaded that there is no appreciable risk. (Paragraph 37)
- If councils are to collect food and kitchen waste only once every two weeks as part of 6. an AWC system, Government guidance must stress the absolute necessity to provide

- householders with sealable containers, such as hard-sided wheeled bins or boxes. (Paragraph 38)
- 7. Food waste represents nearly a fifth of the total household waste stream and is a particularly significant contributor to greenhouse gases when sent to landfill. We recommend that Government encourage more local authorities to adopt both separate food waste collection and at least weekly food waste collection. (Paragraph 39)
- 8. We suggest that the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, in preparing any further legislation, clarify the legal situation on additional charges for rubbish sacks and that the Department learn from the knowledge those authorities have developed of the practicality and efficacy of such systems. (Paragraph 41)
- 9. We note that the Government has set recycling performance targets for local authorities and that the Local Government Association argues for statutory performance targets. We endorse the Government's devolutionary intent to allow collection authorities as much freedom as possible to implement waste policy, but recommend that Government enter into discussion with local authorities about the creation of statutory targets. (Paragraph 45)
- The number of fully trained and experienced local authority recycling officers remains low, restricting the spread and sophistication of schemes available. The continuation of statutory local authority recycling targets, rather than any shift towards merely residual waste targets, would help drive more officer training and development of greater expertise. (Paragraph 46)
- For a variety of historical, geographical, economic and other reasons, practice on the 11. collection of recyclable materials has grown in a piecemeal, haphazard fashion across England over the past decade and more, resulting in myriad local systems and some public confusion. A national recycling system is clearly not feasible in the short term, and the imposition of such a system from the centre would run counter to the Government's proper desire to let councils implement collection strategies suitable to their own areas and electorates. Nonetheless, we urge the Government to evaluate means of achieving more public understanding and co-operation by reducing random and unnecessary differences in practice across local authority boundaries. In particular, wider application of WRAP's national colour-coded recycling system for paper and card, glass, metals and food waste would give not just clarity and simplicity, but substantial long-term economies of scale. (Paragraph 48)
- 12. The adoption of alternate weekly collection systems in around 140 local authority areas has been accompanied in most of them by rapid and substantial increases in local recycling. Whether there is a direct causal link between those two facts is, however, unproven: AWC, where it has been introduced, is always part of a package of measures aimed at encouraging householders to sort more of their waste for recycling. AWC is clearly not appropriate to all areas, particularly highly urban areas characterised by much shared accommodation. Whether a weekly or alternate system is best for a particular area is a matter of local circumstance and a matter for local choice. (Paragraph 49)

- 13. The phrase 'alternate weekly collection' is bureaucratic and confusing, and a good example of how a potentially effective policy can be damaged by jargonistic terminology that is meaningless to most householders. Local councils would do well to find more straightforward descriptions of their own local arrangements. (Paragraph 50)
- Our clear conclusion on collection methods across England is that there is no single system suitable to all authorities in all the range of local circumstances that pertain. (Paragraph 51)
- We recommend that the Government work with the Waste and Resources Action 15. Programme and local government to agree a core definition of what householders should expect from their refuse collection. This should include no complicated rules, rubbish collected when the council says it will be and schemes that suit every household from the largest rural home to the most crowded urban area. (Paragraph 52)
- Several councils have spoken of a need to change the attitudes of residents so that they accept responsibility for the waste they produce rather than seeing it simply as something the council will come and clear up. If there is such a need, the change can only come from councils themselves, implying that they need to develop programmes to educate, inform and persuade the public of the need to cut household waste. They have argued that they are best placed to choose how, when and what to collect in their local areas; the clear corollary is that they share with central Government the responsibility for persuading their council tax payers how to minimise waste in the first place and how to influence retailers and others. (Paragraph 55)
- Revenue-neutral financial incentive schemes aimed at improving local recycling will raise no money for councils and will therefore do nothing to help them manage their waste budgets in the face of rising costs. Indeed, since 'revenue-neutral' does not mean 'cost-neutral', and since any scheme introduced by a local authority will require substantial administration and enforcement costs, they may in practice, run directly counter to the intentions Sir Michael Lyons expressed in recommended local charging schemes, by adding a further cost to the growing burden local authorities must carry. (Paragraph 71)
- 18. It is hard to see how a resident faced with a 'financial incentive scheme' bill for even the indicative £30 contained in the Government's consultation will see it as anything other than a charge, or a tax. (Paragraph 72)
- It is hard to see why any council will want to set up a complicated charging scheme 19. that earns it no money and risks widespread public disapproval. (Paragraph 78)
- 20. We recommend that the Government clarify how financial incentive schemes for recycling will interact with council tax. We seek a detailed explanation of why the introduction of incentive schemes should not be accompanied by reductions in council tax. In particular, we are concerned by the suggestion that schemes "should not" require additional funding from council tax. Whether a local authority raises or

- reduces its council tax to fund schemes or incentives to local householders is a matter for individual councils. (Paragraph 79)
- 21. The Government recognises the risk that new financial incentive schemes to increase recycling and minimise waste may result in more fly-tipping or in people attempting to cut their bills by putting their rubbish in their neighbours' bins. We are not convinced that enough work has been done or guidance given to local authorities on how to prevent such risks from blighting areas and causing disputes. Nor are we convinced that local authorities already faced with increasing waste costs will be adequately funded to deal with increased administration, clear-up and prosecution costs. (Paragraph 89)
- We welcome the Government's recognition that specific groups, such as large 22. families or those on council tax benefit, should not be disadvantaged by the introduction of financial incentive schemes for increased recycling and waste reduction. (Paragraph 90)
- 23. The Government needs to clarify what will happen to householders who refuse to pay additional charges levied under any new financial incentive scheme. Given the small sums involved, prosecution seems an unlikely answer. Given the impact on other householders, councils cannot be allowed not to collect rubbish left out by non-payers. We are unconvinced that councils possess any adequate sanction against refusal to pay and question whether that might not substantially undermine schemes that local authorities may wish to introduce. (Paragraph 91)
- The financial incentive schemes proposed by the Government offer individual householders very little reward for good behaviour and offer councils no immediate financial incentive. We cannot believe that giving some households £20 or £30 a year will remotely outweigh the negative psychological impact of making other households pay more for a service they believe they already pay for through taxation. Breaking the link with council tax and establishing refuse collection as a utility, like gas or sewerage, might have the radical impact the Government say they want. The half-hearted tilt in the direction of charging contained in their current proposals will not. (Paragraph 93)
- We conclude that the introduction of a power allowing councils to form joint 25. authorities where they wish to do so is welcome. (Paragraph 97)
- 26. The move towards greater joint working will be even more welcome if it brings about cost efficiencies, an increasing degree of shared practice and, possibly, some standardisation of approach to collection of different recycling streams and such things as a colour-coded system for different streams. (Paragraph 99)
- 27. The Government has made it clear that substantial infrastructure development will be necessary if waste diversion targets are to be met in the coming decades. In its coming implementation of the proposals in its planning White Paper, the Department for Communities and Local Government will need carefully to balance the desire for simplification in the obtaining of planning permission for major waste-related infrastructure projects with the objections of local communities to new facilities, including incinerators, desired by the Department for Environment, Food

- and Rural Affairs to boost energy-from-waste production from its current 10 per cent to 25 per cent. (Paragraph 102)
- 28. Those authorities that decide to invest in producing more energy from waste will need to develop strategies to send only unrecyclable material for incineration and to use the flexibility in the Landfill Allowances Trading Scheme to trade incineration capacity with other authorities who may otherwise find it difficult to reduce their landfill to the extent required. (Paragraph 103)
- 29. We recommend that the Environment Agency prioritise the audit of London local authorities in its current waste disposal audit programme, because of the higherthan-average proportion of non-household waste collected and disposed of in the capital. We recommend that the Government ensure that reported reductions in municipal waste being sent from the capital to landfill sites are in fact occurring. If a loophole does exist in the current reporting requirement, it must be closed forthwith. (Paragraph 111)
- With the bulk of England's waste far beyond the control of local councils, we recommend that the Government urgently investigate means of improving financial incentives to reduce the amount of commercial, industrial and construction waste that will otherwise continue to fill our rapidly diminishing landfill space. We recommend the rapid roll-out of a programme of affordable recycling services for businesses, especially small and medium-sized enterprises. (Paragraph 113)

## **Formal minutes**

#### Tuesday 10 July 2007

Members present:

Dr Phyllis Starkey, in the Chair

Sir Paul Beresford Mr Bill Olner Mr Clive Betts **Emily Thornberry** John Cummings David Wright Anne Main

#### **Refuse Collection**

Draft Report (Refuse Collection), proposed by the Chairman, brought up and read.

*Ordered*, That the Report be read a second time, paragraph by paragraph.

Paragraphs 1 to 92 read and agreed to.

Paragraph 93 read, amended, and agreed to.

Paragraphs 94 to 113 agreed to.

Summary read, amended, and agreed to.

*Resolved*, That the Report be the Fifth Report of the Committee to the House.

Ordered, That the Chairman make the Report to the House.

Ordered, That embargoed copies of the Report be made available, in accordance with the provisions of Standing Order No. 134.

*Ordered*, That several memoranda be reported to the House.

[Adjourned till Monday 16 July at 4.20 pm

### Witnesses

The following minutes of evidence are published in volume II of this report, HC 536-II

#### Monday 21 May 2007 (HC 536-i)

**Stephen Didsbury,** Head of Waste and Street Services, Bexley Borough Council, and Judith Turner, Director of Veolia, Sheffield, for the Chartered Institution of Wastes Management

Councillor Paul Bettison, Chairman, Local Government Association Environment Board, and **Martin Wheatley,** Programme Director, Local Government Association

John Duffy, Mayor's Policy Director, Environment, and Pete Daw, Principal Officer, Waste, Greater London Authority

#### Tuesday 22 May 2007 (HC 536-ii)

Councillor Gary Porter, Leader, South Holland District Council, Gary Alderson, Director of Environmental and Planning Services, Mid-Beds District Council, Nicola Beach, Head of Waste and Recycling, Essex County Council, for Essex Waste Management Partnership, Ian Davies, Assistant Director, Public Protection and Safety, London Borough of Hammersmith and Fulham

#### Monday 4 June 2007 (HC 536-iii)

Phil Woolas MP, Minister for Local Government and Community Cohesion, Department for Communities and Local Government, and Ben Bradshaw MP, Minister for Local Environment, Marine and Animal Welfare, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs

# List of written evidence

The following memoranda are published in volume II of this report, HC 536-II

City of Lincoln District Council	RC 1
National Organisation of Residents Associations	RC 2
Chichester District Council	RC 3
Tandridge District Council	RC 4
East Lindsey District Council	RC 5
British Chambers of Commerce	RC 6
Kerbside (Calderdale)	RC 7
Absorbent Hygiene Products Manufacturers Association	RC 8
WyeCycle	RC 9
Waste Partnership for Buckinghamshire	RC 10
Mid-Beds District Council	RC 11
Melton Borough Council	RC 12
Essex Waste Management Partnership	RC 13
Somerset Waste Partnership	RC 14
West Devon Borough Council	RC 15
Alex Smiles Ltd	RC 16
Environmental Services Association	RC 17
Bryson Recycling	RC 18
Association of Charity Shops	RC 19
Sea and Water	RC 20
Greater Manchester Waste Disposal Authority	RC 21
West Sussex County Council	RC 22
South Holland District Council	RC 23
Gemini Waste Consultants Ltd	RC 24
Industry Council for Packaging and the Environment (INCPEN)	RC 25
Cambridgeshire County Council	RC 26
North Dorset District Council	RC 27
Environment Agency	RC 28
Chartered Institution of Wastes Management	RC 29
Composting Association	RC 30
National Audit Office	RC 31
Local Authority Recycling Advisory Committee	RC 32
Biffa Waste Services Ltd	RC 33
Shropshire Waste Partnership	RC 34
Furniture Re-use Network	RC 35
Cylch-Wales Community Recycling Network	RC 36
ENCAMS	RC 37
Campaign for Real Recycling	RC 38
Professor Chris Coggins	RC 39
Local Government Association	RC 40

St Edmundsbury Borough Council	RC 41
Sparsity Partnership for Authorities Delivering Rural Services (Sparse)	RC 42
Community Recycling Network UK	RC 43
Waste and Resources Action Programme	RC 44
City of London Corporation	RC 45
Greater London Authority (Mayor of London)	RC 46
DEFRA and DCLG	RC 47
PM Group Ltd	RC 48
Collect Refuse in Oxford Weekly Campaign	RC 49
Piers Eyre	RC 50
Campaign for Weekly Waste Collection	RC 51
Ridgeway Court Residents Association	RC 52
Dr Fiona Gameson	RC 53
Nic Godden	RC 54
Fraser Old	RC 55
Graham Knowles	RC 56
BBC Radio 4 "You and Yours" programme	RC 57
Greater London Authority	RC 58
London Councils	RC 59
North London Waste Authority	RC 60
Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs	RC 61

## List of unprinted evidence

The following memoranda have been reported to the House, but to save printing costs they have not been printed and copies have been placed in the House of Commons Library, where they may be inspected by Members. Other copies are in the Parliamentary Archives, and are available to the public for inspection. Requests for inspection should be addressed to The Parliamentary Archives, Houses of Parliament, London SW1A 0PW (tel. 020 7219 3074). Opening hours are from 9.30 am to 5.00 pm on Mondays to Fridays.

- BP 1 PM Group plc
- BP 2 WRAP Food Waste Collection Trials for North Dorset District Council
- BP 3 Professor Chris Coggins (Supplementary information)
- BP 4 Local Government Association (Supplementary information)
- BP 5 Mayor of London (Supplementary information)
- BP 6 Collect Refuse in Oxford Weekly Campaign (Supplementary information)
- BP 7 Campaign for Weekly Waste Collection (Supplementary information)
- BP 8 British Embassy, Luxembourg
- BP 9 British Embassy, Belgium
- BP 10 British Embassy, Hungary
- BP 11 British Embassy, Denmark
- BP 12 British Embassy, Czech Republic
- BP 13 British Embassy, Germany
- BP 14 British Embassy, France
- BP 15 British Embassy, Finland
- BP 16 British Embassy, Dublin
- BP 17 British Embassy, Spain

HC 988

## List of Reports from the Committee during the current Parliament

The following reports have been produced by the Committee in the current Parliament. The reference number of the Government's response to each Report is printed in brackets after the HC printing number.

On 27th June 2006, by Order of the House, the ODPM Committee was succeeded by the Communities and Local Government Committee and all proceedings of the former Committee were deemed to be proceedings of the latter.

#### Session 2006-07

Third Special Report

First Report	The Work of the Committee in 2005-06	HC 198
Second Report	Coastal Towns	HC 351 (Cm 7126)
Third Report	DCLG Annual Report 2006	HC 106 (Cm 7125)
Fourth Report	Is there a future for Regional Government?	HC 352-I (Cm 7119)
<b>Session 2005–06</b>		
First Report	ODPM Annual Report and Accounts	HC 559 (HC 1072)
Second Report	Re-licensing	HC 606 (Cm 6788)
Third Report	Affordability and the Supply of Housing	HC 703-I (Cm 6912)
First Special Report	Government Response to the Committee's Fourth Report of Session 2004–05, on the ODPM Annual Report and Accounts 2004	HC 407
Second Special Report	Government Response to the Committee's Eleventh Report of Session 2004–05, on the Role and Effectiveness of The Local Government Ombudsmen for England	HC 605

Effectiveness of the Standards Board for England

Fourth Special Report Government Response to the Committee's First HC 1072 Report of Session 2005–06, on the ODPM Annual

Government Response to the Committee's Seventh Report of Session 2004-05, on the Role and

Report and Accounts 2005.

The Fire and Rescue Service **Fourth Report** HC 872-I (Cm 6919) Fifth Report HC 1024-I (Cm 7005) Planning-gain Supplement