

Dedham Vale Society

Article: Household Waste - The Recycling Route

Membership Secretary John Osborn looks at how our local authorities are dealing with domestic waste

The undoubted success of the present Local Authority waste recycling programmes raises the question 'why on earth were government targets not introduced years ago'? The expression is used deliberately as it is the earth or rather the planet that stands to benefit from moves away from the inefficient, costly, and ultimately finite practise of landfill, with the attendant risk of underground water system contamination, to one that aims to extract a positive good from an essential and increasingly growing public service. The problem of what to do about the tonnes of household and industrial waste produced by a society that increasingly discovers its consumer-purchases being packaged for presentation rather than ecological effectiveness has dogged councils for years. Landfill was seen as the solution possibly because of the difficulty of educating a public brought up on the notion that waste, and what becomes of it, was always somebody else's concern. Encouraging the view that waste management is actually a problem for all of us is a fundamental part of all local authority schemes. Inducements and incentives have been introduced and the results are encouraging. Recycling, it seems, is popular although the public does need tangible evidence that its efforts are not being undermined by casual practises on the part of the authorities. A single example of all household waste, that after being carefully separated by householders, is thrown into the same part of the refuse lorry will seriously set back any progress towards sound recycling education quite apart from the damage to the environment. The message needs to be rammed home that short term lapses do far more harm than good. Encouragingly these practises are now less common as the serious business of meeting government targets is pursued.

The guiding statement of the Dedham Vale Society includes the words "to encourage the appropriate authorities and other interested parties to contribute financially and physically to the area's upkeep not only for us but for the generations to come". The management of waste is part of the area's upkeep as the following few points make clear:

In the developed west each person, on average, produces two tonnes of waste annually which, if disposed of in landfill, costs £68 per person per year (and that is just the economic cost.)

Bellhouse landfill site in Colchester, one of 2,300 in England and Wales, receives 100-150 lorry loads, some 800-1,000 tonnes in total, every day. In 2003 it was reported that at the then rate of use all of the landfill sites in Essex will be full within ten years.

A tonne of recycled paper saves 17 trees from being cut down.

The Dedham Vale is dotted with villages - some fourteen in total - lying close to the River Stour between the coast and Sudbury and the smaller Brett and Box rivers. Because the Stour forms the Essex/Suffolk county boundary services for adjacent villages are often supplied by different authorities. The waste management service for fifty percent of the area is provided by Babergh District Council with Colchester Borough Council providing forty percent and Braintree District Council and Tendring District Council the remaining ten. All four councils appear to be above average in terms of government national targets for 2003/4 which is for 17% of all household waste to be recycled. In the case of Colchester the 2005/6 target of 25% has already been met. Set against the one in ten councils who recycle less than 5% of household waste the authorities in the Dedham Vale area can feel some satisfaction although hardly complacency. Babergh District Council, for example, will collect green waste from households but only if placed in a special container which requires a payment of £30 per year for a fortnightly collection. Compared to the households on the Essex side of the river this seems somewhat less than generous. In 2003 Colchester Borough Council introduced an innovative scheme which gave households a fortnightly unlimited collection of all green waste (grass, leaves, clippings, small branches etc). Not surprisingly this has proven extremely popular especially with householders who do not themselves compost their waste and might in the past have had bonfires, driven to the nearest amenity centre or, in the case of larger quantities, ordered a skip. The figure for garden waste collection in the Colchester Borough for May 2003 was 300 tonnes and for the same month in 2004 an almost five-fold increase to 1,300 tonnes. The distribution of three polypropylene re-usable sacks to each household could account for part of this huge increase. Colchester Borough Council appears highly satisfied and has invested heavily to further improve the service. Thirteen new multi-compartment vehicles running on environmentally-friendly bio-diesel, after some initial set-backs, seem to be coping successfully with the demand. But how can all this extra quantity of green waste be satisfactorily absorbed? Perhaps part of the answer lies in the fact that the Borough has the use of a large composting site within a few miles of the town centre.

JF and CM Strathern run the Birch Compost Site on a former WW2 airfield. A contract gained by the Farm business with Essex County Council means that Colchester Borough Council can use the site up to the limits of its present capacity. The public can either use their kerb-side collection facility or deliver the green waste direct to the Colchester Civic Amenity Recycling Centre at Shrub End, Colchester. It is then transferred into 20 tonne bulker lorries and delivered to the Birch Compost Site where it is shredded, composted and screened. On arrival the removal of all foreign particles, mostly plastic, can be somewhat labour-intensive although the owner did agree that the introduction of kerb-side collection, where householders use white sacks, has helped reduce this problem with closer control. The process involves the shredded waste being placed in a series of 3 metre high 'windrows', which are turned at intervals in order to maintain maximum heat levels of 60-70C thereby killing off all weeds. After about 16 weeks the waste is transformed into a dark peat-like substance.

At present Birch Compost Site recycles 6,000 tonnes per annum but this could well rise to 20,000 within a few years now that the site owners have been granted planning permission. This will enable the Council to use Birch for all green collections and once the exemption is removed the owners will be able to sell the finished product on the open market. The compost is currently being used as a soil improver and for plant nutrition on adjacent land owned and farmed by JF & CM Strathern.



The raw material is collected from households



Two of the 'Windows'



Turning the compost

Even the most optimistic forecasts do not foresee re-cycling levels of fifty percent or more in the foreseeable future (although they are certainly achievable) and therefore councils will continue to send more than two thirds of the collected waste to landfill sites which, we are told, will be full to capacity by 2013. The recently introduced government landfill trading allowance attempts to control quantities and should encourage councils to look at alternatives. High temperature incineration which could produce energy but would also produces toxic ash that would need to be disposed of in special sites, might not be the answer. Perhaps Anaerobic Digestion (AD), which involves the breakdown of organic waste by bacteria in an oxygen-free environment, might become more widespread. It is currently being used as a waste treatment process which also produces a methane-rich biogas which can be used to generate heat and/or electricity.

Who knows - perhaps the DVS Summer Newsletter of September 2014 might well be reporting that vastly increased levels of recycling, Anaerobic Digestion and other environmentally friendly methods have completely removed the need for all landfill. For the sake of the planet we must hope so.