

National Assembly for Wales  
Environment and Sustainability Committee  
RW 14  
Inquiry into recycling in Wales  
Response from: Gerry Gillespie

## Submission

### Inquiry into recycling in Wales

Gerry Gillespie – New South Wales –Australia

I submit the following as a contribution to your ‘Inquiry into recycling in Wales’ and while foreign in its origin, this submission seeks to demonstrate that the same criteria and obstructions face us all, world-wide in our search for more efficient and effective use of resources.

As an active participant in the recycling movement I have visited Wales on many occasions over the past fourteen years. In that time I have seen your recycling levels rise from around 5% to some of the best in the world.

This change has been brought about by the active involvement of non-profit groups, the intense participation in community engagement by your own committed civil servants and their engagement with the world recycling movement.

Research from Wales in 2007 has clearly demonstrated that the most effective value for the community and therefore the government, national and local, comes from recycling as a source-separated product directly to a kerbside vehicle.

*RPS report “Survey of Funding of Municipal Waste Management Kerbside Collection in Wales” (page 8)*

This report was very thorough and the conclusions so well-structured, it is quite remarkable that this illuminating piece of research did not forever quell the resistance to home source-separation and direct on-vehicle sorting of material to maintain highest value and best community outcomes in terms of investment in waste management and return on that investment.

The facts in this regard are very strange to tell because the obstruction to such logical and fundamental use of resources is, in the main, maintained by the waste industry and its oligopoly driven by shareholder investment in the need to waste.

The only reason the waste industry ever involved itself in recycling collections was due entirely to community pressure brought to bear by an increasing awareness among the public that you cannot live on a resource limited planet and continue to waste resources ad infinitum.

Eventually this fundamental fault in our material use had to catch up with humanity and indeed it eventually caught up with the waste industry.

The industry tack however was first to convince government to introduce comingled kerbside recycling which meant more investment by the community in trucks and Materials Recovery Facilities in addition to the maintenance of waste to landfill – this to them was a better outcome than previous option, where they only had one income stream.

As long as they could convince local government that collections needed to be done by larger companies with large insurance policies, they made more money than before. Now communities were paying large foreign waste companies for two systems rather than one.

Next they worked for some time to convince local government that the only way to increase recycling levels was to introduce Mixed Biological Treatment facilities for ‘unsorted’ waste.

The advent of these facilities of course meant that downward pressure needed to be applied to community source–separation and recycling by householders by the introduction of MBT plants and the ability to have councils spend even more of the ratepayers money on the construction of these expensive engineering fantasies for the exclusive benefit of financiers, shareholders and engineers’ personal CV fodder.

This is of course all predicated on the absolute errant nonsense that the public do not have enough common sense to separate their waste into various categories, which as I said earlier had been more than adequately put paid to by the Survey of Funding of Municipal Waste Management Kerbside Collection in Wales, conducted by your own Government.

With the EU looking to downgrade the use to landfill of a disposal option, the only remaining alternative left to the Waste Dinosaurs was to reinvent 'incineration' as the next 'wonder cure' for waste under the pseudonyms of 'Waste to Energy' and 'Refuse Derived Fuel'.

The principal fault with this arcane theory is that it clearly exists solely for the purpose of making more money for waste company shareholders.

Governments are consistently duped by the waste industry into making ever-increasing financial investment into waste management alternatives, which can never, and will never, deliver the outcomes which community's desire -which is increased recycling - clearly demonstrated by your own survey work.

I must say at this point that it is my belief that the clear stupidity of the current waste management model is not driven by malice, it is driven by the same thing which condemns us all in our current social model and that is the obsessive need for absentee shareholders to make their profits at the expense of the local community.

The multi-billion pound waste industry invests enormous amounts of money very successfully in lobbyists who have as their primary duty the need to have local government see the 'need' for MBT and/or incineration.

Unfortunately for the public purse, they are very successful at it. This in turn is not the fault of councils or councilors. They, like all others, succumb to the temptation of the magic bullet and the political lobby.

The facts that recycling levels have risen exponentially over the past 14 years is evidence of the community need for better systems. This has been achieved with the engineering fraternity consistently saying that the limits of recycling have been reached. On numerous occasions these pre-determined limits have been overrun by community behavior.

Research has indicated that 90% of people interviewed in the world will recycle if they are given the right tools, information and motivation.

The right tools consist of a good system. The right information speaks for itself. The motivation is the need within us all to provide for future generations. It is clear that we can provide and fund all three of these needs, yet we choose not to do so because we are all in the thrall of the waste industry's shareholders.

The waste industry hyperbole which tells us that waste is a frightening potential disaster, which warrants massive financial expenditure can be readily debunked by a clear look at what waste consist of.

'Waste', broadly speaking is 60% organic 30% recyclable and the rest is either inert or toxic. With only 10% therefore without a ready use and given the claims for the need for vast expenditure by the investors in waste, this materials flow warrants closer inspection.

Most 'developed' countries waste streams are around 60% organic in their content and while these percentages vary depending on where and how we live; large house, semi-detached, high-rise with or without extra land – this material can ultimately be returned to the soil where it is clearly needed.

Anaerobic digestion in some communities can be used to remove energy but, with or without that, the ultimate destination for source-separated, clean organic waste should be the soil from whence it came. It is, as they say, a 'no-brainer'.

Even the most productive soils on earth are suffering from a lack of organic material and the concurrent levels of humus and biological activity needed to sustain food production. Our ability to produce food has been constrained by the mining of our farmlands. Soil is the total answer for organic waste.

What we need to get it there are the right tools, information and motivation. These models exist.

If we then address the 30% or more, which is recyclable, you will find your own research clearly shows the possibilities and practicality of source-separation by community and its efficacy in creating employment and better community outcomes.

The 10% remaining is either toxic or inert. If this small percentage is neither is compostable or recyclable, it clearly cannot be burnt and it clearly should not be buried. If it can't be reused, the question is why is it being made?

Even if, as the legislators, you are hamstrung by free market rhetoric and lack of political will, small, effective processes already exist for the safe destruction of toxic waste. This tiny percentage of the 'waste stream' should be collected separately and disposed of safely until such time as adequate protection can be developed and alternate products made.

Considering the above, waste is clearly no more than a concept. A concept heavily subsidized by French, Australian and Italian investors who wish to ensure that your money leaves home and goes to them.

Waste is a word constructed by science to define those parts of a cycle for which it has no adequate description. No natural system has waste. All systems have outputs.

In any natural system the output for one thing becomes the input to another – even when you do not understand it – we too are part of that natural system.

As human animals living in a natural system why do we have waste, when clearly as described above 90% of our outputs are totally reusable?

The only place waste exists in a natural human system is between our ears. When we have the right tools, motivation and information to manage our outputs to make a profit for our communities, why are we not doing it?

I would suggest it is because we train professionals in the management of waste, give them tools to manage waste and then appoint them to manage waste.

Why should we be surprised that if we give waste engineers very big bulldozers and holes in the ground, we finish up with filled in holes?

We clearly need to give them, as professionals, different tools, motivation and information.

If we keep training for waste, tooling for waste and financing for waste, there is a good chance we will continue to get waste.

Outputs need to be managed by business developers not waste managers.

Waste companies are not interested in community outcomes, nor the development of local business – quite rightfully the only interest the General Manager of a waste company has is the dividend back to his or her shareholders. The more community money they can extract from government the better it is for their shareholders.

Comingled collections for the waste industry are the next best thing to total mixed waste collections. In fact they are better because they need more trucks and fancy equipment.

Waste companies will always tell you that people will not recycle yet the evidence collected by the Welsh Government by your own surveys tells you that this is not true. The best outcome according to your own research and figures is kerbside collection and direct sort to a vehicle. For no other reason than it delivers the highest quality product, with less waste to landfill. This is as true for food waste as it is for an empty glass bottle.

The absolute opposite is true of the waste industry. Their number one best option is all waste mixed into a single bin, then on to an extraordinary, stainless steel thingy which sorts, blows, ferments, hums, clangs, rings, sieves and steams at great cost to your local authority.

This means they can control the transport, the processing and the disposal. All three are enormous shareholder 'profit centres'.

They maximise the cost of lift per home, they maximise the cost of processing by building you a dirty MBT plant and making it as expensive as possible and then they maximise the cost of the disposal point – landfill or incineration by making it as high tech as possible and beating you and your community about the head with your own environmental regulations, where every bulldozer, every truck, every tonne of cover, every incinerator scrubber, every tonne of toxic waste to landfill carries a profit margin of at least 20%.

It must be remembered that there is no such thing as 'Government Funds' – there is only the individual householder's personal purse. Every bit of money you gift to a French, Australian or Italian waste conglomerate is ultimately taken from the pocket of the average householder.

You are the guardians of the public purse and this money deserves to be regarded as an investment of Public Money and like any other investment it should generate a return – for the community – not for foreign waste companies.

Your own excellent research by your own staff, has told you that an investment of a different kind for a different outcome will give you more jobs, a better environment, better soils and a safer future.

A sensible investment in simplicity and recycling systems with the correct tools, motivation and information will give you what your own civil service has already told you.

Recycling works!

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

A quick tour of the literature available world-wide of successful resource recovery systems will highlight that the finest quality materials, source-separated by the householder will deliver the cleanest material which has the optimum reuse value and consistently achieves the best sales price and therefore return on investment.

Your own research has indicated that this type of slow and careful system can be delivered at less cost and more effectively than the highly mechanized, smash and grab, comingled and compacted collection systems offered by waste companies.

Of the successful recycling models in other parts of the world, one of the best is 85% now being achieved by Zero Waste South Australia. In part, this is due to Container Deposit Legislation introduced some years ago, the net effect of which is a community, which is highly aware of the benefits of recycling to the broader community. While the focus of such a program is principally on drink containers, it does highlight that careful, slow collections of any material yield optimum value and return.

The guidance and direction provided by Product Stewardship in the form of Extended Producer Responsibility and Container Deposit Legislation, clearly is the way of the future. However, if we are to achieve the sane objective of drastically reducing the material we



waste, we must begin to have goals which reflect our concern for the future of our children and their children's' children.

With this in mind I submit the following recommendations for your consideration:

- The Government of Wales should continue to play a leadership role in the world community by reducing its Zero Waste to landfill and incineration objective to a target date within 10 years
- The Government of Wales should introduce CDL legislation or similar with a focus on supporting community enterprise and including the returning of organic waste to soil after processing through AD plants.
- The Government of Wales should endeavor to support community enterprise and the circular economy as means of supporting its sustainability objectives.
- The Government of Wales should support any community enterprise or private sector operation that seeks to keep the value of resources within Wales