

Comhar comments on draft Policy Statement on Preventing and Recycling Waste

Introduction

Comhar welcomes the opportunity to comment on this important document, but regrets the very short period allowed for this purpose. This is a very comprehensive document, which has been in preparation over a long period; it might have been expected that Comhar would have been involved at an earlier stage and given proper time to study and comment on the draft policy statement. The following comments are put forward on the basis of the consideration which was possible in the time given, including a meeting between a group of Comhar members and representatives of the Department, at which a number of points in the draft were usefully clarified. This paper supplements and adds to the details already raised at that meeting.

The draft policy statement has many excellent aspects, but fails to fully address some important issues and perhaps oversimplifies others. It presents a range of options, but some choices appear to have been pre-determined, without the reasons being stated. Our comments address a number of general issues in the first place, with further comments in relation to specific chapters of the draft.

Costs/financial issues

The document seems to avoid addressing costs. Withholding unwelcome news might be attractive in the short-term, but it would be unwise to inadvertently mislead people in this regard. Such expressions as 'internalising costs' only postpone the truth. Public co-operation is essential in sound resource management and will not be forthcoming if people feel they are being misled. The table on page 17 might usefully be supplemented by one comparing costs per head, nation by nation. This might give a salutary insight into the costs of good waste management.

The role of fiscal instruments in waste prevention and minimisation should be addressed at an early stage in the document; the provision of economic incentives for reducing waste should be included in each chapter as a key action by Government. Options which should be explored include VAT rates, taxes on raw materials as opposed to use of recycled materials, tax reliefs and levies.

Infrastructure

The general weakness in this area deserves more attention. We are aware that a National Waste Authority (NWA) has been proposed by IBEC and SFA as the best way forward, since many of the problems are national in nature. In addition, many local authorities are too small to gather sufficient expertise in such a complex area as waste management. Regional groupings will help, but the NWA would have the authority needed to, for example, co-ordinate the planning of recycling facilities and the transport links to them. Moreover, an all-Ireland NWA must be worthy of consideration, for implementation when the time is right. However, Comhar has not had sufficient time to debate this issue within the Partnership, and therefore does not have an agreed view on the question of a National Waste Authority.

Infrastructure provision is changing rapidly at present, particularly with the regional groupings of local authorities, and there will be significant developments over the next couple of years. Even if a central authority were to be established at some stage, it is likely that, as in the case of the National Roads Authority, much would still remain to be done at local government level. Local elements are crucial for a properly-operating waste management system; the change in practices in relation to waste management must be “owned” by the local population through increased emphasis on civic and local pride.

Integration with other policy areas

A number of issues related to other policy areas should be considered in the draft statement, with at least a commitment to further exploring the various options. Rail transport of wastes (including recyclables), as used in many countries

between cities and treatment or disposal sites, should be considered. Planning consents for the siting of recycling plants could be conditional on maximising the use of rail/sea transport. Waste policy must also be integrated with the National Climate Change Strategy.

Presentation

The paper would benefit from a starker opening to “catch” the reader's attention by emphasising how historically innocent we have been in this country about the issue: casual, tolerant of polluters, and believing that it's somebody else's problem. Bringing forward Chapter 3 to an earlier part of the document might also help in this regard, by highlighting the current situation and the relative context of Ireland's position.

We suggest that a glossary of terms be included, particularly for the benefit of the non-technical reader. Care should be taken to avoid confusion of terms within the document - for example, it appears that the terms “reprocessor” and “recycler” are used interchangeably. Another example is in the area of hazardous waste, where the general reader needs to know that the definition is very broad and covers, on the current precautionary basis, many familiar substances, such as paints and medicines, which arise in every household.

Chapter 1 - Framework for Action

This chapter should give more focus to some important concepts. For example, people tend not to think of waste as a material resource, which can lead to jobs and other opportunities; this concept should be used more from the early stages of the document. Re-use also needs to be better highlighted in this chapter. Targets for prevention and minimisation should be set and brought to the fore, to give them more attention and focus. This chapter might also be the appropriate place to discuss fiscal instruments.

Chapter 2 - Preventing and Minimising Waste

Reducing consumption

The option of reducing waste by consuming less should be referred to. Economic growth need not be driven by ever-increasing production of short-lived goods - it is EU policy to decouple economic growth from material consumption. The production of high quality goods in smaller numbers might generate as much income and more jobs, but less waste. Growth does not need to be driven solely by manufacture either; people spending less on goods may spend more on services, which tend to create more jobs and (except in the case of overseas holidays) more local jobs too.

Waste minimisation

Many simple steps could be taken in regard to waste minimisation. Multi-component 'display packaging' could be limited to one specimen item, for example:

- men's shirts could be sold in paper prepacks, with a single shirt on display in the usual complex cellophane package;
- small ironmonger's goods, such as nails, could be sold in small cardboard boxes or paper packets instead of blister packs (which form bulky, hard-to-recycle waste when empty).

However, legislation and enforcement are needed to ensure the consumer has this kind of choice. There would be no anti-competitive effect if all manufacturers, on an EU or world-wide basis, were subject to common restrictions. There are numerous precedents, on both environmental and safety grounds (e.g. for cars and electrical goods).

Awareness raising

This section deserves more emphasis, and practical examples of how the message will be delivered should be given. For example, a great chance is being missed by not using the very many opportunities of pushing a slogan at what might be called the "point of disposal". It has long been recognised that advertising at "point of sale" is highly effective. We suggest that public authority bins, vehicles, machines (e.g. street sweepers, Christmas tree shredders), and even

buildings, where appropriate, should carry a slogan which reinforces the message that the work being undertaken is contributing to a more rational waste policy, and exhorting those who see it to play their part. If the right slogan is chosen, it would be catchy and applicable to multiple situations. Such a campaign should have the aim of reinforcing the central message that waste policy is everybody's business: we all create it, we all suffer from it; we all must play our part, etc. Since it is essential to change behaviour, the need to exploit all opportunities of reinforcing the message is compelling. Self-discipline, through education, will be more effective than enforcement – but practicable enforcement procedures will be essential too.

Other examples of the type of specific commitment which might be included are

- a dedicated telephone service to answer public queries in the whole area of waste prevention, minimisation, reuse and recycling (such as operates in Spain), and
- a “walk-in” shop demonstrating all manner of household equipment with reference to waste prevention/reuse and recycling aspects of these goods (one operating in Barcelona also includes energy saving aspects).

Waste audits

Mandatory waste audits could be a very useful tool. They should extend to cover all the costs, such as the cost of raw materials and of labour and energy invested in them. Such audits cannot fail to focus the minds of management.

Chapter 4 - Promoting Re-use of Waste

Mandatory re-use is mentioned but far more legislative support is needed; this need not be anti-competitive, particularly if there is concerted action at EU level. A number of suggestions in relation to various re-use options mentioned in the draft are given below.

There is an unnecessary proliferation of container types and over-complex designs, which minimises interchangeability and restricts the uses for returned

containers. A punitive tax on non-standard containers could help here – and would be most effective if a prominent statement of the tax rate was required on the label.

“Design for Recycling” is much talked about, though not yet widely practised. In many cases, it will not be easy to implement, partly because of the labour cost of dismantling, especially for the miniaturised, multi-component parts of so many modern products. “Design for Reuse” would be much easier; for example, standards could require the use of unlettered glass or plastic for bottles and jars, in a minimum number of styles and colours (as was once common for milk, beer and soft drinks).

“Design for Reuse” would also include reparability. While legislation to require this explicitly would be tricky to draft, a number of steps could be taken to encourage its uptake, including:

- requiring makers to take back worn-out, broken or obsolete goods free of charge (and to establish funds to ensure continuity of this service);
- requiring makers to address repair costs and forecast product life in advertising;
- international agreements to give high weighting to reparability in public-sector purchasing;
- encouraging long-term leasing plans (with ‘free’ maintenance) in place of purchase;
- relieving repair services of VAT and rates.

An additional benefit of reparability is that it would create jobs – many of them in areas of higher unemployment and some well suited to home-workers.

Reuse of unwanted goods can be stimulated by building “swap-shops” where people can leave items they no longer need, while others take what they want, free of charge. Such schemes are more direct than ‘drop-off’ centres and avoid the problem of charities refusing to accept items they cannot find homes for. Charities can still play a role, however, by selective collecting from swap-shops

and/or offering transport to people, to enable them to choose from the available goods.

Chapter 5 - Promoting Recycling of Non-Organic Wastes

Market development

A major incentive for recycling would be the development of markets for recycled goods; one means of ensuring this would be to require, by legislation, recycled material to be used in products. There is also a clear need for market support mechanisms in a time of depressed markets; otherwise, the system would collapse due to being uneconomic.

Cross-Border co-operation

The potential difficulties of cross-border initiatives should be addressed. These include inconsistent local tax regimes, waste charging systems and source separation classifications. As the latter two are still evolving in both jurisdictions, co-operation now could yield a dividend later.

Landfill levy

We would question the appropriateness of introducing a landfill levy at this particular juncture. Landfills properly designed and managed are a necessary part of the waste management infrastructure. However, sufficient of these do not exist at present and those that do are under severe pressure. A number of local authorities will be restricting the acceptance of certain categories of waste in 2002 for reason of lack of space. In the case of Cork Corporation, for example, commercial waste will be restricted to 25% of what was accepted in 2001. The costs per ton of disposal are also going to rise significantly, including for the domestic sector. These increased costs are strong incentives to divert from landfill, and adding an additional levy may not be desirable at this time.

If, however, it is a firm decision to impose a landfill levy, then a number of further considerations arise. The proposal for published rates of escalation is sound but the concept of a predetermined 'final level' serves no useful purpose

and might be a hostage to fortune. Similarly, it would be wise to publish indicative rates of escalation, leaving room for flexibility and perhaps for differential rates for different wastes or localities. The proposed uses of the levy are worthy but a more flexible remit might help relieve some of the current difficulties with the acceptance of infrastructure - as, for example, with cases in the UK of waste management companies devising schemes to use levy funding to the benefit of local communities; these may have been allowed under provisions for “educational’ projects”, for example.

The ‘polluter pays’ principle may be in danger of being used as a catchy slogan. The objective of fostering good practice is laudable and the appeal of waste collection charges obvious, but there is no guarantee that good practice will be the actual outcome at domestic level. The effect might be to divert even larger volumes of household waste than at present into such undesirable ‘black disposal’ routes as kitchen-sink ‘garbage-grinders’, backyard landfills, fly-tipping, domestic-scale incineration (indoors or out) and, for dry recyclables, hoarding. Charging by weight for household wastes might magnify such effects, especially if it is applied as a step change to full cost level, rather than using state subsidies to ramp it up very gradually. The proposed Performance Indicators offer no means of measuring ‘black disposal’ nor could they easily do so.

Chapter 6 - Producer Responsibility

The proposed entitlement “to return ... equipment free of charge to place of purchase” needs to be rethought. For any number of reasons (maker ceased to trade; store closed, relocated, taken over; equipment changed hands, e.g. as a gift; time since purchase; loss of receipt), this idea, while good in principle, would be utterly unworkable. A more practicable option would be an entitlement to return equipment free of charge to “any store dealing in similar goods”. This, however, could equally face opposition or involve practical difficulties (e.g. a small electrical goods shop might not have space to take in a large item such as a chest freezer). The most workable scheme might be based on a levy on the sale of all

such goods. This could be used to pay a relatively small number of larger retailers to accept all equipment, free of charge.

Chapter 7 Promoting Biological Treatment of Organic Waste

While anaerobic digestion is mentioned at the head of this chapter, it is not developed further, despite the fact that recent EU guidance ranks it alongside composting as an equivalent bioprocess option (over 100 large-scale waste digestion plants are running in Europe). Anaerobic digestion should therefore be given active consideration, and the chapter redrafted accordingly, taking account of the current EU draft guidelines on compost quality, etc., which cover both digestate and compost as broadly equivalent products.

Omissions

A number of areas are mentioned in the draft, but not fully developed. These areas, which need to be given further attention, include

- Commercial wastes. If councils can refuse to collect or accept industrial wastes, since the law does not require them to take it, some industries may be forced to scale down or close their Irish operations. Asking industry to become self-sufficient in waste management at short notice is unreasonable; their participation in improved waste management is an absolute essential.
- Farm wastes, and agricultural wastes in general. This is a sensitive topic, but farms are major generators of wastes. Most farm wastes are harmless – or even beneficial – if treated properly, but they can cause problems, both locally and off-site. The more visible examples are well-known: mostly liquid wastes, such as animal slurries, fertilizer run-off and silage effluent. However, stockpiled or buried solid wastes, such as outdated biocides, might also contaminate groundwater. More general agricultural wastes, such as waste from meat processing plants, also need to be addressed.
- Sludges and slurries. Some major solid waste streams typically arise as aqueous suspensions or sludges: for example manures, some industrial wastes and the sludges formed in water treatment and waste-water purification. This

makes them relatively unsuitable for treating by composting or incineration, although they are often suitable for anaerobic digestion. Sludge Management Plans are currently being prepared by local authorities as part of the Waste Management Plan process, so these wastes should also be covered in policy plans.
