

environmental services

THE MJ FOCUS

Should we charge for waste?

Charging for waste collection is highly controversial. **Paul O'Brien** discusses how it can be introduced to householders as one of a range of measures to reduce the amount of waste going to landfill

There is no getting away from the fact that the UK needs to cut the amount of waste it is sending to landfill.

We are currently producing 330 million tonnes a year, and recycling just 27%, compared with up to 60% in other European countries.

A Budget increase means landfill tax will reach £48 a tonne by 2010. And if European Union targets to reduce landfill are not met, as a nation, we could be paying out £500,000 a day in fines.

The pressure on local authorities to get waste right is not just economic. Everyone is now well aware of the link between this and climate change.

Refuse collection is the service residents associate most closely with their council. And it is one that has got the national press interested in local government, with a campaign in the *Daily Mail* against alternate weekly collections.

Although evidence from APSE's Performance Network benchmarking service shows recycling has improved where councils have introduced such collections, they are still not popular among the public. So the idea of charging for waste collection is one that will need to be handled sensitively.

Sir Michael Lyons' inquiry recommended powers for local authorities to charge for domestic waste. The Government's strategy on waste, due imminently, is likely to contain announcements on such powers.

APSE believes councils should be given the option to charge in a way that is agreed locally. This would help cut the amount of waste going to landfill by incentivising recycling and penalising those who ignore such initiatives.

But this must be just one aspect of a multi-pronged attack. The amount of waste going to landfill can be cut through a combination of measures, including encouraging manufacturers to reduce excessive packaging and educating householders to throw away less.

DEFRA's own figures show 40% of household waste is retail packaging.

The Government must be bolder about tackling producer responsibility. One suggestion would be to have a 'traffic lights' system of red, green and amber labels to alert the public to excessive packaging.

Making consumers think about what they buy changes manufacturers' behaviour, as demonstrated by the growth in organic and fair trade products.

People will consider waste issues if it costs them not to, and charging is a means of forcing them to do so. In Germany, Holland and Belgium they recycle 50-60% of waste as a result of proposals similar to those we would like to see adopted.

The way charging is introduced needs careful consid-



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eration. Schemes require a three-way split between recycling and green waste and residual household waste. Methods of charging fairly for residual household waste need to be assessed.

One way of doing it is inserting micro-chips into wheelie bins to calculate the amount people are throwing away. Another is to set the size of wheelie bins and make people purchase sacks if they exceed its capacity.

Any such measures would have to be backed up by a major education campaign for businesses and the pub-

lic. One argument against waste charging is that it is a form of regressive taxation. But a system which incentivises rather than penalises would give householders a refund, if the amount of waste they produced was less than their personal allowance.

The beauty of such a system is it incurs less cost for people who are prepared to behave responsibly, and also helps educate others to throw away less.

Another argument against waste charging is that it will increase fly-tipping.

But using powers under the Clean Neighbourhoods and Environment Act 2005 forcefully would send out clear, zero-tolerance messages.

We await the Government's pronouncements on waste charging and are sure that heated press and public debate will follow. ■

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