



APSE briefing 19/27: Implications of the Resources and Waste Strategy (2018) for Local Authorities in England – Parliamentary Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee Inquiry comments.

Key Issues:

- The strategy is too prescriptive and lacks flexibility seems to be the key findings of the Inquiry, suggesting a better approach would be to allow local authorities more freedom to develop recycling strategies tailored to the needs of their communities.
- The inquiry also feels that there needs to be greater clarity on the extra funding pledged to support the additional demands placed on local government, particularly in relation to the length of time funding will be available to help pay for the long-term infrastructure changes necessary to deliver the aims of the strategy.
- Serious consideration needs to be given to mandatory free garden waste collections and fortnightly residual waste collections, which the Inquiry felt may be inappropriate for some local authorities.
- The briefing note highlights a number of key recommendations which the Inquiry feels needs to be addressed if the targets of the strategy are to be met.

Background

Following the publication of The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) Resources and Waste Strategy for England, it is clear that several aspects of the strategy are the responsibility of local authorities to deliver. Bearing in mind the impact of austerity and associated budgets cuts there was concern that the targets of the strategy would place unacceptable demands on local authorities.

A short inquiry was therefore undertaken by the Parliamentary Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee to look at the following issues:

- What the financial implications are for local authorities of the Government's Waste Strategy.
- What the likely effects will be on the recycling rates of local authorities.

- How provisions in the strategy may affect existing contracts for waste collection and disposal.
- Should waste services be standardised across England or should there continue to be flexibilities for local authorities.
- What the opportunities are for closer joint-working between authorities, particularly in two-tier areas.

In light of these proposals and promises, the Chair of the MHCLG Committee inquiry, Clive Betts MP, said:

“It is important that there is a comprehensive strategy to increase the levels of recycling. But ahead of placing greater responsibilities on local authorities we must first look at their ability to meet them. With budgets shrinking, and acute challenges elsewhere, is there capacity to tackle increased demands on waste services?”

“We will also be looking at how appropriate a one-size-fits-all approach will be, and if there would be benefits to allowing local authorities some flexibility to meet the specific waste challenges in their area.”

In light of these proposals and promises, the Chair of the MHCLG Committee inquiry, Clive Betts MP, said:

“It is important that there is a comprehensive strategy to increase the levels of recycling. But ahead of placing greater responsibilities on local authorities we must first look at their ability to meet them. With budgets shrinking, and acute challenges elsewhere, is there capacity to tackle increased demands on waste services?”

“We will also be looking at how appropriate a one-size-fits-all approach will be, and if there would be benefits to allowing local authorities some flexibility to meet the specific waste challenges in their area.”

Detail

This briefing note highlights the key recommendations and comments presented by the Committee to the Under-Secretary of State for Local Government, Rishi Sunak MP as part of the ongoing Government consultation on the Strategy. These will form part of a final report which is likely to make further recommendations in light of responses received to the Inquiry’s consultation.

CONSISTENCY OF SERVICES

Consultation within Government and with local authorities

The Inquiry was concerned that there was little consultation with local authorities before the strategy was published, particularly around the achievability of recycling targets, financial implications and the desirability of the proposed changes to waste management services.

Whilst the committee agreed improving recycling rates across the UK was right and consistency of collections would help in this aim, there needs to be a consideration as to which systems of collections would work best in a local authority area rather than imposing a 'one-size fits all'.

It was felt local authorities were therefore best placed to determine the most effective collection strategies and systems in their areas.

The inquiry agreed that waste minimisation is a key priority and that the EPR scheme will help to reduce waste which as an impact could lead to reduced recycling rates, therefore there needs to be innovation to ensure there is a wider range of materials collected for recycling so as much resource is taken out of the waste stream as possible.

What was equally important was that what waste there was, could be recycled, so attention needs to be placed on ensure unrecyclable plastic waste is reduced and alternatives to plastic packaging are developed and Government mandates that these are used in preference to plastic packaging. Where recyclable plastics are present then local authorities should ensure that it has collection capacity for these materials.

Dry Recyclables

Local authorities should determine how it collects such materials, as source separation where up to six bins or receptacles could be needed, may not be feasible, particularly in urban areas where space is at a premium.

Weekly food waste collections

As well as the costs which may be incurred to set up such a service, it was felt the infrastructure need would outweigh the benefits of weekly food collections, and that food is currently being collected without the need of such a service. Again this is a decision for local authorities to make.

Fortnightly residual waste collections.

It was felt imposing fortnightly residual waste collections on local authorities was wrong, and such a decision should be the responsibility of locally elected representatives who know the needs of their local residents. It was also felt less frequent collections (three/four weekly) had additional benefits of persuading people to recycle more.

Free garden waste collections

Currently many local authorities charge for garden waste collection to those households which require it and the system works well. The Inquiry felt the environmental benefits of a mandatory service are not yet fully understood.

Deposit Return Scheme

There was the view that this should be deferred until the full financial implications of the proposed extra responsibilities being placed on local authorities is understood, as the implementation of such a scheme could result in lost income to local authorities at a time they are having to introduce new recycling services to meet the strategy's targets.

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

Extended Producer Responsibility

It was felt that this was a welcome move, as producers should take more responsibility for the waste they contribute to, including its treatment/disposal. However there was concern that as this was seen as a major funder of local authority changes to waste services, if over time as producers become more successful in reducing waste, so funding to local authorities will fall.

It is therefore suggested that at least every two years Government should review income levels and provide a top-up if necessary, as well as giving greater clarity as to how EPR funding will be passed onto local authorities.

Funding for new services

There is concern that although Government has said it will provide funding for new or transitional services as well as ongoing operating costs it is not clear how much this will be and how they have estimated these costs. Therefore Government should invite the LGA and other council representatives to review how these costs have been arrived at and publish the data and also commit to providing additional funding deemed to be required.

Re-negotiation of existing contracts.

The re-negotiation of contracts and the costs involved in order to meet the Government's strategy proposals are a real unknown. Councils are concerned they may need to pay over-the-odds costs for short term contracts before the EPR funding is introduced in 2023 which they will need to provide new services.

It is suggested contractors should cover such costs but if not then Government should meet these costs.

Need for new infrastructure

Recent media reports suggests the UK recycling infrastructure is inadequate to meet the Waste strategy needs and requires funding of up to £20 billion to have the right infrastructure. This will eventually be paid for by the private sector, but until then costs will be passed on to producers, consumers and local authorities.

Therefore Government needs to work closely with industry to ensure the right infrastructure is put in place, but also ensure these additional cost to the private sector are not unfairly recouped from higher contract prices to local authorities.

FURTHER CONSIDERATIONS

Incineration

Although incineration should be a one of the final choices for waste treatment, the imposition of an incineration tax will impact unfairly on local authorities in the short term. Therefore such a tax should only be imposed when the new recycling infrastructure is fully embedded and successfully operating.

Two-tier authorities

As an aim of the strategy is to ensure greater consistency there is an opportunity to review how local authorities collect and dispose of their waste. Therefore Government should review existing models of delivery and governance for the management of waste in two-tier authorities and include this as part of its ongoing consultation process.

APSE Comment

APSE fully supports the findings of the Inquiry regards the issue of governance and local authorities managing services within their own areas. However, if consistency of collections is to be a goal, then there will need to be a level of agreement between authorities to make the recycling of waste as easy as possible for residents, as it is the very complexity of recycling systems which has led to the idea of consistency in the first instance. Without greater consistency then the quality of materials collected will remain poor, and therefore the anticipated development of private sector reprocessing facilities may not materialise.

There is real concern that additional collections and increased frequencies, coupled with the potential loss of income through deposit return schemes, will seriously impact on the financial ability of local authorities to deliver the aims of the strategy. Therefore the commitment from Government and ease of access to the promised additional funding is critical, if the aims of the strategy are to be realised.

Any shift towards the proposed new system will involve a fundamental change in both current collection and disposal methods undertaken by local authorities. They will not be starting with a blank sheet of paper and have considerable investment in existing assets. Moving to a new system will not only take time but a major financial investment, that local authorities simply do not have the money within existing resources to deliver.

The funding promised by Government is via the EPR system which needs to be closely monitored to ensure not only compliance in reducing waste but also that payments towards funding the additional collection infrastructure are forthcoming. Without guaranteed income Government has to be prepared to step-in and cover any shortfall.

There is no doubt that local authorities have the skill and ability to deliver the aims of the strategy but the availability of funding is the key to the strategy's success. Consequently Government will have to seriously commit to supporting local authorities and managing producers and the private sector reprocessors if their strategy is to be successful and thereby deliver the closed loop economy which is necessary at a time when there is a growing need to develop a more environmentally sustainable society.

Wayne Priestley

Principal Advisor