

## Environmental Information Sheet

### SAVE OUR RESOURCES

#### Waste and water

##### Overview

In a world of finite resources, we need to learn to do more with less. Very often what we call waste is just a resource in the wrong place. Resource efficiency means using less resources (materials, energy, water etc) to make something in the first place. It means using and re-using things for longer rather than buying disposables. And finally it means recycling whatever we can.

The average person in the UK generates about half a tonne of waste every year – an increase of 15% in the ten years to 2005. And it is estimated that every tonne of waste sent to landfill represents a further 25 tonnes at the manufacturing and extraction stages.

Around 40% of household waste could be composted. This biodegradable waste is a particular problem in land fill sites, since it creates methane as it rots down, a much more potent greenhouse gas than carbon dioxide. This doesn't happen when it is composted in the garden or commercially. About 2% of household waste is nappies, which take around 500 years to rot down.

Improved management of our "waste" can have practical social and economic benefits, from the provision of goods to people on low incomes or the creation of training and employment. For example, most counties have organisations which refurbish old furniture, white goods or computers for distribution at low cost to people on low incomes. Other goods (tools, sewing machines) may be donated overseas.

Improved waste management can also lead to cost savings, both in businesses and at home. For example, over 15% of the food we buy is thrown away. A more resource-efficient society, in which there is no stigma in the use of recycled goods from charity shops or elsewhere, for example, would benefit us all. In rural areas, recycling can pose an environmental (and economic) dilemma, with the costs of collection outweighing any advantages. It is therefore particularly important for rural people to try and reduce their waste at source.

Water is a good example of a resource that most of us take for granted: we use 70% more than we did 30 years ago. However, it may become increasingly scarce in the future, as climate change leads to drier summers. Taking more water from our rivers and aquifers (as well as from reservoirs) can already mean serious consequences for wildlife as water levels drop. The quality of our water is another issue, with concern about all the pollutants from tampons to contraceptive pills that land up in our seas and water systems.

##### National framework

A new national Waste Strategy is planned in 2007, replacing the previous one drawn up in 2000. It is likely to move the emphasis towards greater waste prevention. While the proportion of waste recycled is increasing (27% in 2005/06), the overall amount of waste generated is also increasing, so the amount going to landfill does not go down. The waste strategy will probably also look at how greenhouse gases from waste management can be reduced, for example in reducing the amount of biodegradable waste sent to landfill. This may mean more promotion of home composting. Up to now it has been excluded from local authority waste targets, since it is hard to monitor, although it is the cheapest and most effective environmental option.

European legislation has been a major factor in improving waste management in the UK. This has included directives to reduce biodegradable waste in landfill by 65%, to enforce recycling of waste

electrical and electronic equipment (the WEEE Directive), and to reduce packaging. It has led to the provision of strict targets with financial penalties for local authorities who do not meet them. See <http://www.letsrecycle.com> for overview of waste management including legislation.

Europe has also played a leading role in improving the water quality of our seas and rivers through the Water Framework Directive. This requires all inland and coastal waters to reach "good" status by 2015. The government is also seeking to introduce minimum standards of water efficiency in all new homes (consultation early 2007).

## Key players and programmes

### Waste

**Community Recycling Network:** National umbrella organisation for community-based, not-for-profit and co-operative waste management groups. 400 members with wide range of scale and activity. <http://www.crn.org.uk>

**Freecycle:** Like a free version of e-bay, local freecycle groups give away unwanted goods via the internet. Complete households have been furnished via the site. Some groups also run local events, and exchange of goods helps cement social networks. <http://www.freecycle.org/>

**Furniture Reuse Network:** Umbrella organisation with c.400 members enabling re-use of furniture, white goods, computers etc by people in need. Often provide employment and training for excluded groups. <http://www.frn.org.uk/>

**Local authorities:** Responsible for recycling, collection and disposal of waste. Recycling facilities and kerbside collection vary widely from district to district. Some are proactive, with provision of incentives and subsidies, or support for volunteers and community groups.

**Mailing Preference Service:** Register free to stop junk mail. <http://www.mpsonline.org.uk>

**Wastewatch:** National waste education charity <http://www.wastewatch.org.uk>

**WRAP:** The Waste and Resources Action Programme was set up by government to promote recycling and waste reduction. It works with businesses, local authorities, schools and the voluntary/community sector. Initiatives include home composting, real nappies and the development of markets for recycled goods. Sometimes provides funding or support in targeted areas. Subsidised compost bins (not in all areas). <http://www.wrap.org.uk/>

### Water

**Environment Agency:** Public body with responsibility for water issues from flooding to water quality. Tips on saving water, overview of the water situation (eg. drought, flooding etc), and Water Framework Directive. <http://www.environment-agency.gov.uk>

**Water companies:** It can be cheaper for water companies to reduce demand rather than try and meet it by building new reservoirs. They often provide subsidised water butts, and run water-saving promotional activities.

## Priorities for action

### Waste

#### Individuals

Composting at home is the first priority, since at least one third of household waste can be composted, avoiding the methane produced when it goes to landfill. Then look at how you can cut down waste in the first place, for example by putting a stop to junk mail or using a cloth shopping bag. Thirdly, reuse whatever you can, from nappies to secondhand goods. And as well as recycling, buy recycled products to help create a market for recyclables.

### **Communities**

Short term projects might include production and promotion of a community waste directory, with local information on recycling all sorts of things from old spectacles to jam jars. A longer term commitment might be to set up or help moderate a freecycle group. Community composting projects have been popular in the past, but are now faced with legislative barriers and only for the determined.

### **Water**

#### **Individuals**

Some households may be better off financially with a water meter, which encourage you to save water. Installation is usually free and you can change your mind within the first year: check with your water company. It's worth cutting down on water use in the garden especially, by getting a water butt and choosing more drought resistant plants.

It's also important to take care in what you put down the toilet (no tampons or condoms) or the drain: some of this will land up on our beaches. See <http://www.bagandbin.org/> . Use biodegradable cleaning products (eg Ecover) that break down quickly.

#### **Community**

There have been few community projects related to water consumption. Most have started from conservation of local rivers and wetlands – see the **Care for Your Area** sheet.