

How to Get a Zero Waste Economy

James Greyson's evidence to the DEFRA's [consultation on their waste review](#)

What hope for another review?

The government of this country, like others, have been regularly reviewing waste for decades, without any meaningful shift towards an economy that thrives without dependence on systematically turning ever more resources into ever more wastes. Wastes of all kinds are filling up the world's waters, lands and air - and governments are snoozing on the job! This latest review does not detect this systemic error nor ask how to overcome it and consequently cannot be expected to lead to meaningful change. Instead this review continues to reinforce the ways of the past:

1. Temporary, little publicised, top down and narrow dialogue rather than continuing person-to-person dialogue. The experience is like feeding my time and creativity into a faceless bureaucratic black box where it appears to vanish! "We're listening during this brief consultation and when it's over we'll be glad to get back to business as usual"
2. Adopting currently-popular language ("In DEFRA we want zero waste") to perpetuate old goals ("actually, we just want zero waste to landfills and we're prepared to overlook dumping to air and water").
3. Missing the significance of waste as a defining characteristic of unsustainable economics and as a leverage point for getting ourselves out of our self-created economic and ecological black-hole. "We're just asking waste-nerds some nerdy questions about waste."
4. Framing questions to obscure the actual options and to make dud options appear more attractive. For example there is no question about the 'separation at source' (which is a basic feature of any practicable zero waste economy, but it would preclude incineration) and questions about 'energy from waste' misleadingly combine incineration (dumping to air) with anaerobic digestion (a non-dumping option). "It's a consultation but guess what? We've decided already!"
5. Linking weak incremental goals (do more on waste prevention and reuse) with genuinely radical and necessary goals (stopping waste at its source) which deceives society into accepting any action as progress. "We're talking big but thinking small."
6. DEFRA's 'need for evidence' takes a traditional 'predict and provide' approach to waste management planning, guessing what waste will be created and catering for it rather than even considering the alternative approach of creating the conditions where the economy generates the amount of waste corresponding to DEFRA's stated goal - ZERO!
7. The elephant in the room is economic growth. Waste has been traditionally tolerated by government within a muddled mythology that it's necessary for growth. Any review that omits the role of growth, and how to achieve it by phasing out waste, is a waste of public money and contributing to the deficit problem rather than helping.
8. The research that examines the above points has not been commissioned by DEFRA because it isn't on DEFRA's agenda or horizon. "We support the research that supports the way we always think and act around here."

My evidence

I offer three peer-reviewed papers and an international conference presentation that set out:

- how waste is a defining feature of economic success and
- a straight-forward economic tool for switching from a designed-to-fail economy to a designed-to-succeed economy.

This is the latest piece, which was presented to a NATO Advanced Research Workshop as part of a package together with other defining features of future economic and ecological security. [Precycling insurance and the possibility of continuing growth](#) Web address: <http://bit.ly/3rds witch> On that page you can find links to the other related resources with further information.

Please find below a copy of my previous comment to DEFRA's on-line [discussion](#) and my response to the survey.

DEFRA discussion comment

The beginning of waste management?

We don't yet have 'waste management' in this country; we have 'getting-rid-of-waste management' that includes try-a-bit recycling and don't-really-try reuse and prevention. Waste decisions are made by those responsible for end-of-pipe management (getting rid of it) with the options routinely strangled by scarcity of public money and scarcity of understanding among public officials.

A working waste hierarchy?

The waste hierarchy has been implemented in reverse, with a presumption in favour of disposal and an assumption of endless ecological sources and sinks. When one form of disposal (landfill) is constrained you try the next (incineration). When incineration is opposed you try some recycling. Lastly, you barely ever try with reuse and prevention.

Private Finance Initiatives (PFIs)

Current centralised 'waste management' provides copious advice for local authorities in how to channel public opinion towards predetermined conclusions. This is most powerfully implemented by 'private finance initiatives' which provide publicly funded advice and publicly funded sweeteners to systematically exclude the public from decisions on contracts that the public are obliged to pay for. PFIs are locking much of the country into multi-decade dependence upon centralised capital-intensive private-profit-led mixed waste disposal schemes, and the sustainable non-disposal options are being squashed flat by the process. It's a shambles and a disaster.

What should the nation's ambition for waste management be?

1. Rethink it. Waste policy will remain frozen in centralised dictat until bodies like DEFRA make engagement and dialogue a permanent feature of the decision-making process, not just an unadvertised blip. Funding for genuinely innovative thinking on waste should be available and research programmes should actively seek innovation, not just the commissioning of supposedly independent studies that just happen to support predetermined conclusions.
2. Reframe it. Long before waste starts to become a technical what-goes-where issue it should be framed ecologically. Looking at waste ecologically we can learn something from nature; huge complexity but a simple no-waste-accumulation principle. We can learn that zero-waste is not really zero-waste if we're incinerating (switching to landfill in the air). What matters is whether used resources become new resources (for nature or people) or whether they are left to accumulate as wastes (in the land, air or waters).
3. Revive it. We can operate the waste hierarchy the right way around simply by dealing with waste as a front-of-pipe issue. Instead of assuming a pile of waste and planning what could be done, we assume no waste and plan what could be done. China is starting to do this with their national 'circular economy' strategy, that combines ecological, climate and economic revival. (OK they haven't worked out yet how to implement it but let's not sit on our hands waiting.)
4. Throw it away! We should dispose of disposal. Every human need can be met without causing accumulating wastes. Every product that exists today can in one way or another be rejigged to not end up as waste (this is called precycling). The cost of arranging this can be included within product prices by a simple market mechanism (<http://bit.ly/precycling>) The investments stimulated would spark an economic recovery. Our capacity for resource efficiency and ecological services would surge, shifting the economy from systematically pillaging nature to systematically enhancing it. Domestic industry would be resurgent. As a bonus this 'circular economy' would make our climate ambitions achievable, rather than as now just rhetorical.

Response to DEFRA's waste review survey

1. Do you think we are doing enough to reduce the amounts of waste we produce?

Of course not.

2. Do we need to change the way we view waste so it is treated as a resource in itself and nothing of value is thrown away?

Of course.

3. How could Government make better use of the skills and knowledge of others (e.g. businesses, charities and local communities) in improving our management of waste?

Fund promising independent research and waste-reduction activity. This was stopped by the previous government so the skills and knowledge available to the nation was drastically shrunk and centralised.

4. How can communities benefit more from having waste disposal facilities in their area (e.g. sorting facilities, landfill sites, incinerators)?

Dud question. Sorting and recycling etc are a different category to waste dumping facilities (landfill, incineration etc). You may as well ask if communities can benefit from more facilities for both conserving and exploiting nature.

Part 2 – Waste prevention & reuse ‘Waste prevention’ means taking steps to reduce the amount of waste created, as well as making waste less harmful to our health and the environment.

5. Do you have any suggestions how in England we can produce less waste?

Yes. Dud question - narrow and unambitious. The slow progress of waste reduction efforts in the UK and elsewhere is due to such questions, which neglect the role of waste as a defining strategy that determines the potential for lasting economic success. Has the UK even begun to comprehend this? Judging by this survey the answer is not yet! Better ask, "How in England can we achieve an ecological and economic revival by training to economy to systematically produce less waste and more useful resources?" I suggest this would be straight-forward to do, so long as we understand that we are talking primarily about economic policy - with the potential to radically liberate the country from dependence upon producing waste.

6. What should manufacturers or the Government do to make products last and be used for longer? Government needs only to make the strategic choice mentioned above by enacting simple legislation that provides the market with suitable waste-reducing signals. Everything else would then follow these signals, including detailed national waste policy, manufacturer initiatives and consumer behaviours.

7. Should the Government introduce rules to prevent certain types of waste being produced? If yes, do you have views on which types of waste?

Dud question - in almost all cases it is pointless trying to stop waste at the point where the waste is 'produced'. Waste is an outcome of how products are designed and how the economy is designed. As explained above, the economic design comes first. After that, few rules would be required for particular waste types. Examples would be wastes beyond the reach of markets (eg garden wastes, soil), hazardous wastes and hazard-creating processes (eg waste burning).

8. Do you buy or own re-used products (e.g. cars, furniture, electrical goods, and clothes)? Reply to question 8: Lack of economic leadership by all governments so far.

9. Do you know what you can recycle in your area?

Yes

10. Approximately how much of the waste that you produce do you recycle?

Most

11. What stops you from recycling more?

No collections for flimsy plastic packaging. Unrecyclable multi-material packaging.

12. What else would encourage you to recycle more?

All packaging being recyclable and collected for recycling.

Part 4 - Energy recovery & waste disposal Energy recovery is about creating energy from the waste that we produce through a number of different technologies. It's often less effective than reusing or recycling our waste, but more effective than throwing something into landfill.

13. Do you think that recovering energy from waste would benefit your area?

No

14. Would you have concerns about having an energy recovery plant, such as an incinerator, in your area?

Yes

Energy recovery plant You have concerns about having an energy recovery plant, such as an incinerator...

a. What are your concerns?

Incineration is the result of waste policy stagnation. It seems like a 'solution' only because those with responsibility for waste issues look only to the end of the pipe, "what can we do with all this junk?" rather than the front of the pipe, "how can we throw away the whole idea of waste?" The incinerator being built near us will make no use of the surplus heat after electricity generation so it is an exceptionally poor use of both the energy, the materials and the money lost to more productive purposes. Like all incinerators, it will produce toxins and greenhouse gases in vast quantities, destroying human and ecological health.

The resurgence of incinerators is a symptom of government's 'success' in replacing common sense and local democracy with centralised authoritarian nonsense. It is no co-incidence that the liabilities of incinerators are given to the public and the profits go to private businesses with a deep influence on decision-making.

b. Would you be more welcoming of energy recovery facilities in your area if the local community benefitted in some way from those facilities?

Not at all

c. Is there anything else that could be done to address these concerns?

Try to see that the job of government is not to push ever-harder to justify decisions that make sense only with silo-thinking. Public money has been wasted for many years trying to overcome public concern about incinerators by manipulating information and democratic processes. It would have been better spent rethinking waste, since incinerators have no part to play in any liveable future and all money spent on them will sooner or later be lost. So better to cut the losses and get over the incinerator-obsession immediately. Non-incineration energy recovery from separated waste flows is another ball-game. AD and localised biochar production both have large energy potential, which can be realised only after all mixed-waste EfW is removed from the picture.

Part 5 - Energy recovery & waste disposal Although we must reduce the amount we throw away into landfill as much as possible, it's a fact of life that there will always be a need to throw away some waste that we can't get anything else from.

16. Do you think that we should reduce the amount of waste going to landfill by as much as possible?

Yes

17. Which types of waste should be thrown into landfill rather than treated in a different way?

Only legacy unrecyclable wastes. Landfill and all end-of pipe solutions are obsolete.

18. Do you think that a long term target of sending no waste to landfill is realistic?

Yes