

Anaerobic Digestion (AD)

Briefing for Waste Campaigners



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Our sincere thanks for the information, support and comments from:

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Briefing Objectives

This briefing is intended to assist waste campaigners in mounting confident, robust, professional and effective campaigns that persuade Local Authorities (LAs) to adopt forward looking, sustainable, waste management strategies, in line with the Waste Hierarchy, that:

- Reduce consumption, maximising reuse, and then recycling.
- Change patterns of consumption and reduction so as to minimise residual waste through high recycling and the gradual withdrawal of materials that cannot be reused, recycled or composted; and
- Pass biowaste that cannot be reused or recycled, through recovery processes that are sustainable in the carbon balance (climate change) context, and are otherwise non-polluting.

For food waste, this means AD!

This briefing should be read in conjunction with Friends of the Earth's September 2007 briefing, entitled 'Anaerobic Digestion'

http://www.foe.co.uk/resource/briefings/anaerobic_digestion.pdf

Links to Appendices to this briefing and to Associated Briefings are listed in section 7 at the end of this briefing, and are available at:

<http://ukwin.org.uk/knowledge-bank/ad-briefing/>

Endnotes appear in section 8.

1. AD, Biowaste and Biogas

AD is a biological process that occurs naturally when bacteria break down biowaste in environments with little or no oxygen and create biogas and a stabilised¹ digestate (a fertiliser). Biogas is a mixture of methane (60%) and carbon dioxide (40%). AD is effectively a controlled and enclosed version of the process taking place in landfill but the methane and CO₂ emissions are captured, not vented into the atmosphere.

Biogas (with or without removal of the CO₂) is a valuable source of heat energy.

Biogas can be

- Converted to meet the specifications of natural gas.
- converted into liquid fuel. The technology for direct conversion to electricity exists although is not yet at a production stage.
- Converted to hydrogen or other hydrocarbon gas.
- Cleaned and then used to meet local energy needs by, for example, using spark ignition gas engines to power electricity generators.
- Cleaned and used to power road vehicles – this may soon attract Government funding along the lines of the ROC system.
- Cleaned and used to heat the AD plant that produced it.

Biowaste is a term used to describe organic waste that is putrescible (liable to decay) and which forms a substantial proportion of MSW in the UK. Biowaste can include food waste, horticultural and most agricultural wastes, sewage sludge and timber.

The garden and food waste element in biowaste forms an important part of domestic waste as a whole – at least 30% of it, or according to the Open University Household Waste Study carried out on behalf of DEFRA, 41.5%. See:

<http://www.defra.gov.uk/environment/statistics/waste/research/download/ou-rpt-20081008.pdf>

Almost any organic material, except for timber and 'woody' materials, can be processed with AD including waste paper and cardboard that is of too low a grade to recycle (e.g. because of food contamination), garden waste, food wastes, industrial effluents, sewage and animal waste. However, within the municipal solid waste (MSW) scenario, AD performs best with food waste.

For further details, see **Appendix A** at:

http://www.ukwin.org.uk/files/pdf/Appendix_A_UKWIN_AD_Briefing_December_2009.pdf

2. Anaerobic Digestion – its advantages

AD is the only available technology for recovering the full potential from food waste and diverting it from landfill, and AD is a sustainable technology.

Combustion² processes are unsustainable approaches to domestic biowaste treatment because

- of its high water content, because
- incinerators are inefficient (they waste most of the energy that they accept) and rely on a proportion of dry materials, usually plastics, of high calorific value (CV) and
- because of the GHG and toxic emissions,

Whilst AD works well with green (leafy) garden waste, source segregated, it cannot break down the lignin content in the woody materials that are difficult to segregate from garden waste. The most effective solution for garden waste is aerobic³ composting. Whilst no biogas is produced, aerobic processing is cheaper to operate than AD.

For domestic waste, effective kerbside segregation is and will remain the best basis for AD / aerobic treatments (essential if the requirements of PAS 110 are to be met).

Purpose grown energy crops may be used on their own in AD plants or in combination with biowaste

For further details on the AD process see Appendix A at:

http://www.ukwin.org.uk/files/pdf/Appendix_A_UKWIN_AD_Briefing_December_2009.pdf

3. Progress with AD adoption and why

Waste management companies and AD plant suppliers are, normally in partnership with local government, progressively installing AD plants across the UK and much of Europe for energy recovery / recycling purposes. Some plants take energy crops as their feedstock and are primarily for the purpose of biogas generation. **See Appendix B** at:

http://www.ukwin.org.uk/files/pdf/Appendix_B_UKWIN_AD_Briefing_December_2009.pdf

Elsewhere in the world, in India and China in particular, AD is delivering an important means of capturing the potential in biowaste, and, at the same time, improving health and reducing forest clearance

The UK government is encouraging the use of AD, and further development and is supporting the Anaerobic Digestion Task Group in developing a wide ranging Anaerobic Digestion Implementation Plan.

The National Grid proposes to develop biogas recovery for replacing North Sea gas supplies to domestic consumers over the next decade.

For links to more details see Section 7 (Appendix D and under UK Government and National Grid).

AD not only recovers much useful energy from waste but, unlike thermal technologies,

- recovers it in a form that can readily be utilised efficiently and flexibly
- recovers it in a form that is compatible with conversion to meet natural gas specification thereby reducing dependency on a fossil fuel from neighbouring countries and thereby offering an element of security of supply.
- produces it at plants that are environmentally friendly

Sewage has for many years been anaerobically treated and water authorities (e.g. Northumbrian Water) are now installing Advanced AD plants that, using the latest technology, can output greatly increased volumes of useful gas.

4. Local Authorities within the UK

Within the UK, AD may still be viewed with some suspicion by some waste disposal authorities, who are vulnerable to being persuaded to see incineration as a tried and tested, simple, solution, particularly if they are reluctant to maximise kerbside segregation such as to ensure that residual waste is free of biodegradable material and can thus safely be put to landfill.

In these circumstances, AD may, as part of a Mechanical Biological Treatment (MBT) plant, be used, in conjunction with aerobic composting facilities, to treat residual⁴ waste. Once stabilised, this waste can be put to landfill.

MBT can potentially be used as a stepping-stone within a true 'zero waste' strategy but, since by definition it processes waste that has not been source segregated, it must be no more than a stepping stone and the residual, stabilised, output from MBT should be put to landfill and not used as Refuse Derived Fuel (RDF).

5. Environmental and Greenhouse Gas Implications

The proximity Principle is best met by 'community' AD plants (these can be part of distributed energy schemes) in each locality processing separately collected food waste and, in rural areas, animal wastes. To be economically viable, AD plants need to process at least 40 000 tonnes annually, implying serving 40 000 households or a combination of farms, households, food processors and retailers.

AD plants are normally designed to blend into the background, rural or industrial, and many operate now on relatively remote agricultural sites. The process is a quiet one.

The desirability of utilising biogas for heating rather than power generation is illustrated by the fact that, for the same level of CO₂ emission, utilising biogas for heating implies some three times the usable energy compared to utilising it for electricity generation. In addition, the GHG offset that results from the fertiliser output from AD replacing chemical fertiliser can be of the similar order as that achieved by using the biogas output for heating.

For more details see appendix E at:

http://www.ukwin.org.uk/files/pdf/Appendix_E_UKWIN_AD_Briefing_December_2009.pdf

For links to more details of how, in environmental terms, AD compares with thermal and other waste disposal processes see section 7

6. The AD plant

AD plants are complex and there are numerous configuration variations dependent on feedstocks and suppliers, but there are some standard requirements. Moreover, the technology is continually advancing, particularly with the aim of increasing biogas recovery.

There must be provision for the receipt of waste such that odours cannot escape. An enclosed area, maintained below ambient pressure and with 'airlock' entrances is essential.

The feedstock must be suitably shredded, turned into a sludge and then pumped into the digestion vessel and if the entire digestion process is to be completed in one vessel, each stage must take place at a different level within the digester vessel and the contents must be agitated. Two or more vessels may be operated 'in parallel', or different vessels, 'in series', may house different digestion stages.

Biogas is collected during the digestion process and piped away for storage and 'scrubbing' to remove any impurities. Fully processed digestate must be extracted from the vessel(s).

To optimize the digestion process, the biodigester must be kept within defined temperature limits and rapid changes will upset bacterial activity. In most cases digestion vessels require some level of insulation and/or heating. Some installations circulate the coolant from their biogas-powered engines in or around the digester to keep it warm, while others burn part of the biogas to heat the digester. Heating can be expected to result in an increase in biogas production during colder periods.

For details of AD plants, flow charts and a schematic layout see Appendix C at:

http://www.ukwin.org.uk/files/pdf/Appendix_C_UKWIN_AD_Briefing_December_2009.pdf

7. Information

Appendices with links

Appendix A: AD and Biogas – the biochemical process

http://www.ukwin.org.uk/files/pdf/Appendix_A_UKWIN_AD_Briefing_December_2009.pdf

Appendix B: AD Plants in the UK

http://www.ukwin.org.uk/files/pdf/Appendix_B_UKWIN_AD_Briefing_December_2009.pdf

Appendix C: The AD Plant

http://www.ukwin.org.uk/files/pdf/Appendix_C_UKWIN_AD_Briefing_December_2009.pdf

Appendix D: Gas from AD, Strategic and Energy Efficiency considerations

http://www.ukwin.org.uk/files/pdf/Appendix_D_UKWIN_AD_Briefing_December_2009.pdf

Appendix E: Safety and Monitoring

http://www.ukwin.org.uk/files/pdf/Appendix_E_UKWIN_AD_Briefing_December_2009.pdf

Other links

UK Government

The recent report of the AD task group, of January 2009, is available on:

<http://www.defra.gov.uk/environment/waste/ad/implementation-plan.htm>

More details of government strategy, and those of supporting stakeholders, can be found via: <http://www.defra.gov.uk/environment/waste/ad/government.htm>

Defra's Information Portal on Anaerobic Digestion – <http://www.biogas-info.co.uk/>

National Grid

<http://www.nationalgrid.com/NR/rdonlyres/9122AEBA-5E50-43CA-81E5-8FD98C2CA4EC/32182/renewablegasWPfinal1.pdf>

Friends of the Earth (FoE)

FoE briefings can be found at

http://www.foe.co.uk/community/campaigns/healthy_planet/incineration_index.html

- Dirty Truths – the climate impacts of energy from waste and residual waste treatment: http://www.foe.co.uk/resource/briefings/dirty_truths.pdf
- Up in Smoke- why Friends of the Earth opposes incineration http://www.foe.co.uk/resource/media_briefing/up_in_smoke.pdf
- Mechanical Biological Treatment www.foe.co.uk/resource/briefings/mchnical_biolo_treatmnt.pdf
- Pyrolysis, gasification and plasma http://www.foe.co.uk/resource/briefings/gasification_pyrolysis.pdf
- Food waste collections http://www.foe.co.uk/resource/briefings/food_waste
- 'Landfill Allowance Trading Scheme' briefing: <http://www.foe.co.uk/resource/briefings/lats.pdf>

Associated Briefings

These are expected to include:

- MSW preferred recycling methods and disposal processes
- Thermal Processes: Incineration, Pyrolysis, Gasification and Autoclaving
- MBT and aerobic processes
- Waste Treatment Technologies compared.
- Carbon Sequestration
- Health and Safety (emissions related)

These will be available at

<http://ukwin.org.uk/knowledge-bank/ad-briefing/>

8. Endnotes

¹ Stabilisation refers to the reduction of bio volatility or biodegradability such that a material will no longer be a serious source of greenhouse gasses (GHGs).

² Combustion processes include conventional incineration, gasification and pyrolysis

³ Aerobic digestion, often called composting, is a bacterial process occurring in the presence of oxygen. When biowaste is treated under aerobic conditions, bacteria rapidly consume the biological element and convert it into carbon dioxide whilst leaving the non biodegradeable element as compost.

⁴ residual waste is waste remaining after as many recyclables as possible have been recovered. Residual waste in an MBT plant will be the waste remaining after mechanical and other mechanised sorting processes have captured these recyclables. This should not be greater than 7% of MSW. This figure is considered (as at 2009) to represent the element of waste consisting mainly of non recyclable packaging materials.