

GOVERNING SUSTAINABLE WASTE MANAGEMENT

*Home Composting Promotion
in Newcastle*

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1 INTRODUCTION

Since *Waste Strategy 2000*, municipal waste policy (MWP) has undergone considerable upheaval. Local authorities which until recently had to concern themselves with little more than the collection, planning and disposal of waste, and a relatively narrow range of regulations, today have a radically broadened agenda with progressive statutory performance targets for recycling and composting, as well as responsibilities for diversion of waste from landfill, recovery from waste and waste minimisation. In the wake of these developments, the *Governing Sustainable Waste Management*¹ project seeks to examine what facilitates, and what prevents, the development and implementation of sustainable MWP in the North East of England, and the wider lessons which can be learned across the UK. The project involves an overview of MWP across the region, and the analysis of three case-studies: Durham County Council; Newcastle City Council; and Stockton Borough Council. In each case, semi-structured interviews have been conducted with local policy-makers and stakeholders, and a range of policy documents have been analysed. Six initiatives which aim to reduce, re-use or recycle waste have been selected for further research, involving semi-structured interviews with relevant actors, documentary analysis, and interviews and participant observation with those communities involved in the particular waste management initiative. These research 'snapshots' are intended to illustrate the range of good practice taking place across the region and the challenges facing the development of sustainable waste management policy and practice.

This report focuses on home composting promotion within Newcastle. Undertaken since 1996 by Newcastle City Council (NCC), in April 2004 this work was taken over by the Waste and Resources Action Programme (WRAP), a central government body, in partnership with NCC. The research involved semi-structured interviews with relevant NCC officers and WRAP staff, informal interviews with members of the public at events where home composting promotion took place, and participant observation of people's engagement with the WRAP initiative in action. The report details the background of home composting promotion in Newcastle and the development and activity of the WRAP initiative, and considers more broadly the factors which influence public engagement with home composting, the role of targets in shaping the delivery of such initiatives, and the nature of partnership working and service delivery in this area. We hope that in highlighting the positive lessons and the challenges that our research has uncovered, the report will be of interest to local authorities as well as to regional and national government.

The report is structured in the following way. Section 2 provides background information on the development of MWP in Newcastle, and Section 3 details the day to day activities undertaken by NCC and WRAP in encouraging composting among Newcastle residents. Section 4 highlights the good practice evident in this case-study, while Section 5 outlines the key challenges which have been faced in encouraging people to home compost, in terms of where and how promotion has been undertaken, the policy context within which it is situated, the difficulties of both partnership working and the delivery of an integrated service. Drawing on this analysis, Section 6 identifies the implications of these findings for sustainable waste management, and Section 7, in conclusion, places this report within the broader framework of the findings from the research project as a whole

2 BACKGROUND

2.1 NCC municipal waste policy

NCC is a Unitary Authority and has responsibility for the collection and disposal of municipal waste, as well as for planning for the facilities to provide these services. The responsibility for leading on waste management lies with the Street Services Division of the Council's Neighbourhood Services Directorate. NCC's *Waste Management Strategy and Action Plan (2005)* states its vision as seeking "to achieve zero waste by treating waste as a resource and not a

¹ The project team acknowledges the support of H J Banks & Co. Ltd. funders of the project through the Landfill Tax Credits Scheme, facilitated by Entrust. We are also grateful for the support of the International Centre for Regional Regeneration and Development, University of Durham. Finally we wish to thank our many respondents for the time and support they have given to the project to date. For more details, visit the project web pages via www.dur.ac.uk/geography/research/researchprojects/.

problem”, aiming to achieve this through improving “how waste is collected and dealt with and ensure that this balances the environmental benefits, social gain and financial costs to the community”. A range of actions are set out in the waste strategy, including:

- raising public awareness of waste minimisation and recycling/composting;
- working in partnerships with commercial, voluntary and community sectors;
- reviewing bulky waste collection;
- piloting kerbside collection of green wastes/additional materials for recycling;
- improving recycling centres.

Currently, approximately 100,000 homes are served by kerbside collection services, leaving only medium and high rise properties, accounting for around 20,000 households, to be served by different means. Around half of the city's 48 high rise blocks are now served by communal facilities, and there are a further 21 communal recycling facilities and 4 larger recycling centres, while 10,000 compost bins have been distributed across the city by NCC in the past few years².

2.2 Key drivers for managing biodegradable municipal waste

Since *Waste Strategy 2000*, and in response to the 1999 Landfill Directive, the ways in which biodegradable municipal waste (BMW) is managed has come under critical scrutiny and legislative pressure. The introduction in 2001 of statutory performance targets for recycling

and composting waste for each local authority under the Best Value Performance Indicators (BVPI) framework has had a significant impact on levels of recycling and composting across the UK. In 2002/03, just 4% of waste generated in Newcastle was recycled or composted, compared to a national average of 14.5%³. However, by 2003/04 recycling had risen significantly, to 10.1%, meeting the council's interim target of 10%, and on course to meet their BVPI target of 18% in 2005/06. Furthermore, the introduction of the Landfill Allowance Trading Scheme (LATS) in April 2005 places an onus on waste disposal authorities to limit the tonnages of BMW going to landfill, and as a result the financial costs of disposing of BMW at landfill sites is set to increase over the coming years.

In this context, home composting is just one initiative which NCC have put into place to address the BMW component of the waste stream. At time of writing, a new Mechanical Biological Treatment (MBT) facility is about to become operational in Byker, at the site of the old Energy from Waste plant⁴. Designed to extract the organic section of the waste – which will then be taken for in-vessel composting in Northumberland – it is anticipated that the MBT



Image courtesy of www.recyclenow.com

² NCC (2005) *Waste Management Strategy and Action Plan*.

³ DEFRA (2004) *Municipal Waste Management Survey 2002-03*. London: Department of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs.

⁴ See Watson and Bulkeley (2004) regarding the political sensitivity of this development at www.dur.ac.uk/geography/research/researchprojects/.

facility will improve NCC's achievements with regard to the BVPI targets and serve to divert the amount of biodegradable waste being sent to Landfill and hence create a favourable position for NCC with respect to the LATS regime.

In addition, NCC have recently started a pilot collection of organic garden waste from 5,000 houses across the city, to ascertain whether it is economically viable to provide such a service city-wide. This builds on a similar pilot in the west of the city, originally a six month trial that ran for three years collecting approximately 300 tonnes a year and producing 180 tonnes of compost, which stopped in 2002 due to a period of financial hardship at the Council during which it was not seen as a priority. The green waste from the present pilot is taken to the Parks and Countryside Training site (PACT) for windrow composting – the same destination of the green waste deposited at the authority's Recycling Centres.

Despite these other initiatives, there has been a long standing interest in home composting within NCC. Composting at home is the most sustainable method of dealing with biodegradable kitchen and garden materials⁵, removing both the environmental and economic impacts of transport and larger scale mechanical treatment of such materials. In addition, while composting at amounts greater than 5 tonnes at any one time (community and commercial composting) are subject to licensing and strict regulation under Animal By-Products Regulations, home composting is exempt.

3 IMPLEMENTING HOME COMPOSTING PROMOTION

3.1 The Council Scheme

For eight years, NCC ran their own Home Composting Project, which had a dedicated home composting officer based in a working garden in Jesmond Dene. NCC bought compost bins in bulk, to be sold on through the project at a highly subsidised rate. Newcastle residents were eligible to buy the bins, and to do so rang the relevant officer to pay over the phone and arrange collection from Jesmond Dene. On collection (generally arranged so that small groups arrived together), residents were given an informal 'hands on' training session by the project officer, ensuring personal contact between residents and a composting expert, and the opportunity to ask questions, discuss 'top tips', see compost 'in action' and exchange experiences regarding compost making and its use – many buyers were already dedicated composters. The compost officer also operated a telephone helpline from the site, the number of which was handed out on information leaflets (including the tips for composting outlined during the training session) as bins were collected.

On average over this period, approximately 1200 bins were sold per year. An annual postal survey of the previous year's buyers averaged between 600-700 responses per year, and consistently indicated that the majority of bins were still in use. One specific survey was undertaken to buyers of four years standing, which showed that 90% of bins remained in use. This project ended in 2004 when NCC agreed the partnership with WRAP, who were to take over the promotion and sale of compost bins.

3.2 The WRAP Home Composting Scheme

WRAP was established by the Department of Trade and Industry (DTI) and the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA), with a mission to "accelerate resource efficiency by creating efficient markets for recycled materials and products, while removing barriers to waste minimisation, re-use and recycling"⁶. WRAP's home composting scheme is one of three initiatives within their Waste Minimisation Programme. Initially established in 2003 for two years, this has been extended for a further two years. The scheme includes:

- working with local authorities to promote the sale of subsidised bins in their area;

⁵ See the Community Composting Network website: www.communitycompost.org.

⁶ www.wrap.org.uk.

⁷ See: http://www.recyclenow.com/home_composting/index.html

- increasing awareness of what can be composted through a national advertising campaign, together with promotional literature, events and a website⁷;
- providing advice and support for all households engaging in home composting, via support materials, a dedicated helpline, and regional advisors; and
- developing a model which allows local authorities to calculate how much waste has been diverted from landfill as a result of home composting activity.

The main focus of the scheme, in practice, is the sale of subsidised compost bins, which is publicised in liaison with local authorities: on their websites, through authority press, newsletters, and the local press. To facilitate this process, WRAP employs regional home composting officers, and a North East officer was appointed in April 2004 on a part time basis. The officer's role is to *promote the sale* of subsidised bins, through attendance at community and public events and in other public spaces they identify as relevant. The officer is available at these events/sites to answer questions about the process of composting, and the bins that are available for purchase (which come in a range of designs) are on show. In addition, WRAP have a 'demonstration bin', consisting of a half bin (dissected vertically), filled with a plastic model encapsulating the progress of food and garden waste through the composting process from top (identifiable vegetables) to bottom (identifiable compost) of the bin, enclosed by a transparent perspex window.

In terms of the logistics of bin sales, the publicity materials provide a telephone 'hotline' number, operated by a contracted company, through which residents of local authorities working in partnership with WRAP can purchase subsidised bins and other composting equipment (postcodes must be given over the phone for delivery addresses, and are checked against local authority postcodes. The storage and distribution of the bins are contracted out to another commercial business, who deliver purchased bins to resident homes. The WRAP initiative also incorporates a helpline, contracted to a private company, whose number is listed on the information booklet provided in a 'starters pack' delivered with the bins. The starter pack includes a fridge magnet, the latest issue of a bi-annual compost 'magazine' and other small promotional items. These and other promotional materials are also available on the website.



Image courtesy of www.recyclenow.com

Aside from the sale of compost bins and promotion of composting, another important objective (for both WRAP and the local authorities) is to quantify how much biodegradable material is diverted from landfill by the average home compost bin over an annual period, with the intention that a 'formula' be produced allowing local authorities to claim home composting activity against their LATS targets - for example, that each bin sold accounts for 220kg of waste diverted. NCC (and other local authorities) have been lobbying for such a formula since the introduction of statutory targets for recycling and composting. It is anticipated that WRAP will release a figure in autumn 2005. However, it is unclear whether compost bins sold *before* the WRAP initiative will be admissible in this new form of accounting. While those local authorities, like NCC, who have worked hard to establish home composting locally before the advent of the WRAP scheme are arguing that their efforts should be recognised, in order to provide a 'standardised' measure it may be that only those compost bins distributed through the WRAP scheme will count.

4 GOOD PRACTICE IN NEWCASTLE

4.1 Changing public perceptions of home composting

The main deterrent for home composting amongst those people interviewed was the inconvenience the activity was perceived to entail. Respondents described separating green waste, kitchen materials especially, as taking too much time and space, with space for a bin itself also at a premium in the garden. The dirt and smell attached to 'rotting vegetables' was another disincentive, with people fearing rats and foxes in their gardens, and envisaging a health hazard for themselves/their family. Interestingly, among those interviewed relatively new to composting, many described their initial trepidation regarding inconvenience and dirt as being unfounded, and were surprised at how easy/unmessy the process was. However, others described discontinuing composting activity if 'problems' such as sludgy compost or evidence of vermin occurred. Aesthetic considerations with regard to home composting were ambivalent: some people described buying bins because they 'keep the garden tidy-looking' (as opposed to self-build 'heaps'), while other respondents thought the bins 'ugly' and a disincentive to home composting.

The WRAP home composting initiative has sought to counter these perceptions through the development of their national campaign and advertising materials. Having initially launched the 'Everyone loves a Rotter' campaign, depicting a bald man in an apron composting a banana skin, the campaign was changed to address public concerns about composting. The bright, attractive materials now used, which have a 'cartoon' like appearance, was certainly effective in attracting passing traffic at a number of events, and the phrase 'get the bin which makes your garden more beautiful' captures both the positive potential of compost while steering away from the stereotypical images of compost as something dirty and smelly. The promotional campaign has been designed to complement the broader 'Recycle Now!' educational programme for which WRAP are also responsible, and as part of this initiative 2005 witnessed the first adverts on national television for home composting.



Image courtesy of www.recyclenow.com

4.2 Engaging the public

More than simply addressing public concerns and prejudices, home composting promotion in Newcastle has successfully engaged people in home composting. The initial NCC programme, through a relatively small-scale campaign and operation, distributed a significant number of home composting bins across the city, and evidence from the council's surveys – both in terms of response numbers (consistently high rates for a survey from a council) and the positive responses given – indicate that these composting bins have been put to good use. While it is not possible to ascertain whether the same use is true for those bins distributed through the WRAP initiative⁸, it is clear that the scheme is being taken up by a large number of households, both in Newcastle and elsewhere. While WRAP reported being disappointed with the first year's sales figures in Newcastle (2,200 bins sold against an anticipated 10,000), NCC staff consider this to be 'successful', emphasising that this figure is *on top of* the 8,500 bins already 'out there' through previous NCC promotion.

The research with members of the public at events where WRAP promotion occurred suggests that there are two predominant reasons that people compost at home. The first is a strong association between compost activity and gardening, among active gardeners. Compost is a valued product, used for new plant growth, and the its nutrient benefits understood and appreciated – even if the processes through which nutrients form are less well comprehended. There is an interlinked sense of home compost being more 'natural' and, therefore, better for the garden (sometimes defined explicitly in terms of being 'organic', sometimes in a more vague description implicitly 'knowing' shop-bought compost as less environmentally friendly⁹). In addition, some gardeners pointed out the financial savings in producing compost at home. The majority of gardening home composters had been undertaking the activity for several years, and many had several bins or self-designed 'heaps'. The second key motivation for home composting was an environmental awareness of the need to reduce waste, and this group of composters were, in the main, regular and committed recyclers, while some also identified the need for waste minimisation. People composting for environmental reasons were also generally not new to the activity and composted kitchen as well as garden material.

The WRAP initiative shows the potential to divert more biodegradable materials away from landfill by engaging with these two groups – 'environmentalists' and 'gardeners' – in particular by encouraging people already committed to the concept of composting to compost more *materials* (kitchen as well as garden materials, for example) and *more* material (buying additional bins to increase their capacity to compost). Moreover, by engaging and rewarding these people, the scheme reinforces the message that being a good 'environmental citizen' pays, and may serve to deepen commitment and change the norms and expectations of some sectors of the community as to what should happen to kitchen and garden waste, in turn shifting patterns of behaviour.

4.3 Innovation and staff commitment

The range of initiatives which NCC have undertaken to address the biodegradable component of municipal waste, including the composting of parks and garden waste, schemes for the kerbside collection of garden waste, and the new MBT initiative, as well as the home composting projects, is impressive. Although many of the schemes have been of a pilot nature – due primarily to the funding constraints within which the Council operates and the nature of grant funding available – collectively they show a commitment to seriously addressing this key fraction of the waste stream.

This innovative approach has been backed up with staff commitment. The composting officer employed by the council for several years was instrumental in the success of their initial scheme, and the interest of senior managers in the project enabled it to run year on year without losing funding. Equally, the WRAP scheme relies on its regional representatives to get

⁸ The research project did intend to interview people who had previously obtained a compost bin through the WRAP scheme but it was not possible to arrange access to these individuals.

⁹ The issue of home compost being peat-free was only rarely mentioned.

the message across, and to engage with the public. It is clear that in the North East, the representative is dedicated to the cause of increasing rates of home composting, and, in the face of much weekend and after-hours work, has been committed to the scheme.

5 KEY CHALLENGES

5.1 The policy framework

The current policy framework for managing municipal waste is heavily influenced by the presence of performance targets. One side effect of these targets is that local authorities are under increased (financial) pressure from LATS to hit diversion from landfill targets, and BVPI audits to show value for taxpayers' money. Given that home composting cannot currently be counted towards diversion rates, the benefits of promoting such activity are limited to improving recycling figures through reducing overall waste arisings, and thus less politically salient. The fragile nature of political will for home composting (and waste reduction initiatives more widely) threatens the development of long term, comprehensive approaches to encouraging composting activity. The production of a 'formula' enabling composting to 'count' within LATS is greatly anticipated, and should increase the support for composting promotion across central and local government. As stated previously, it is unclear whether the bins sold by NCC *before* the WRAP initiative will be accepted within statistics, while there remains the thorny issue surrounding whether less official composting (home-made heaps, community composting) can be included in figures and how this may be achieved. Excluding non-WRAP composting activity could erode the integrity and legitimacy of the agency's attempts to promote composting, across the local authority and within the community and voluntary sectors - the latter of whom have largely been excluded from WRAP's work in the North East to date.

Equally, in the scramble to meet performance targets multiple different initiatives for dealing with biodegradable municipal waste have been put into place, and these could have negative consequences for home composting. The contractual requirements for the MBT facility pose a potential challenge to the promotion of home composting, in that a minimum amount of biodegradable material is needed as feed for the plant for it to operate effectively. Likewise, were home composting to become highly popular, it poses a threat to the economic viability of the roll-out of green waste collections across the city. There will always be some households who cannot or will not compost at home, in particular houses with no or small gardens (terraced housing, flats), and collecting their biodegradable materials must receive continued consideration even as home composting continues to grow.

5.2 WRAP targets and the approach to promotion

In a climate of performance targets, the demands within the WRAP initiative to achieve bin sales appear to drive the current operation of the scheme. Two key issues emerged through the research regarding the implications of this approach for the success of home composting promotion.

First is the matter of *where* WRAP undertakes promotion. The regional officer specifically targets 'compost friendly' events such as agricultural and flower shows, and garden and 'green' festivals. Undoubtedly, some people are encouraged to start composting for the first time, but WRAP is largely 'preaching to the converted', with many people buying second bins to improve their composting system or new bins to replace their homemade heaps. While this is positive, as discussed above, and demonstrates a more proactive approach to outreach than was taken by the NCC project (which relied more on NCC leaflet drops, press releases and other authority literature), it is led by auditing pressure. In the first year of the initiative, WRAP also went to several supermarkets, the Newcastle Mela and tried 'drop in' sessions in community centres, advertised through extra local leaflet drops. Public attendance/interest at these places was very low, and as a result did not represent a good 'outcome' (in terms of bin sales) for WRAP resources, and as a result will not be repeated during year two. Part of the problem is that one officer, working part-time, has a very large geographical area to cover, and cannot possibly take the 'demonstration' to many sites in Newcastle, so must target time/effort. This is supposed to be addressed through working in partnership with the local

authority, who can apportion relevant staff time to support the WRAP officer at events and promote composting at other sites¹⁰. However, during the first year of the scheme partnership working between NCC and WRAP was not as productive as it could have been (see 5.3).

Secondly, *how* home composting is promoted needs consideration. While monitoring of bin use after sale is being undertaken by a consultancy company for WRAP, figures were unavailable at time of writing. However, NCC's experience in compost education through training suggests that "seeing compost in action" *does* facilitate on-going compost activity, and this is supported by the experience of home composting projects in the community sector across the country¹¹. Crucially, seeing, touching and smelling a compost heap enables people to not only learn, in context, what the activity of composting entails, but also *problem-shoots far more effectively* than educational materials. Seeing what to do about sludgy, smelly heaps in practice, accepting the presence of flies and learning how to minimise it, etc. are potentially activity-stopping issues made less 'scary' by experiencing them for real. WRAP's approach of minimal staffing coupled with maximising the number of bins sold makes this level of compost education impossible without linking better into local networks (see 6.1). Limiting WRAP presence to events where many individuals are already composting, coupled with the lack of 'hands on' education, raise questions as to how effective the WRAP initiative really is in terms of decreasing the amount of biodegradable waste sent to landfill.

5.3 Lack of meaningful partnership working

The relationship between WRAP and NCC Street Services Division has been fraught. When the NCC bid to work with WRAP was successful, the existing project became obsolete, leaving the incumbent home composting officer (of over five years' standing) without a role. As an acknowledged expert on composting, the officer was encouraged to apply for the WRAP post and was interviewed twice, but not appointed. Meanwhile, the officer was approached by WRAP for existing educational materials (a short book, pamphlets and other literature), which the officer passed over in the belief that it would be "pointless to reinvent the wheel". The officer believes that current WRAP material draws closely from this work, which would be acceptable if referenced (it is not). WRAP also invited the officer and other relevant NCC staff to consult on their initial promotional literature designs ("Everyone Loves a Rotter"), but they reported that their suggestions were ignored – as noted above, this campaign was later replaced. The (ex) home composting officer, by this time working in a new role for NCC within their 'Enviro Schools Programme', was also asked to attend public events on behalf of the council and promote home composting (bin sales) alongside the WRAP regional officer, who had not worked in composting previously, and even to train the WRAP officer in composting. At this point, the NCC officer, with line management support, declined to have anything further to do with the WRAP initiative.

From WRAP's point of view, the authority structure and culture within NCC has been problematic for developing effective working practices. In particular, the physical situation of the Neighbourhood Services department – located across the city from the Civic Centre and geographically dislocated from the main City Council – has been seen as detrimental to WRAP's work in Newcastle. It is thought that there is a lack of cohesion within NCC and a sense that waste and composting are "not taken seriously" by officers in central positions. For example, the IT department (in Civic Centre) took over two months to update NCC's web pages after the implementation of the WRAP scheme, resulting in many misplaced calls to the old NCC home composting project's number in response to WRAP promotion¹². In addition, local authority culture is seen to be averse to weekend working, which is when a majority of public events are held, and hence there was a lack of staff participation at the events where WRAP most needs support. Nonetheless, WRAP describe their model as working well in other local authorities across the North East and the rest of the UK.

¹⁰ Among other North East authorities working with the WRAP scheme this is the case, though staffing resources remain far from adequate to cover areas comprehensively.

¹¹ For examples, see www.communitycompost.org.

¹² There is, of course, an issue here regarding the competency of the public, provided with a number on WRAP leaflets, but (through loss/disposal) resorting to the web for information.

Having signed up for a two year partnership, both parties have been obliged to continue with the scheme. Working relations have certainly improved over the course of the project, although NCC staff remain convinced that WRAP's approach is less likely to facilitate on-going changes to individual's behaviour, lacking personal local contact and follow-up, while the regional WRAP officer needs to continue to deliver the programme in the manner established at the national level with little scope to respond to local concerns.

5.4 Disintegrated service provision

A key challenge to the effectiveness of promoting bin sales and, more vitally, ensuring that they are utilised is the fragmented nature of WRAP's work. Respondents in the research reported frustration when contacting the sales telephone line, often hearing a recorded message or not getting through at all – many describing this as a disincentive to start composting. NCC (in line with other local authorities in the area) receive calls of complaint from residents regarding this situation, and the ex-home composting officer stated that calls are made to the old project number (which has been transferred to the new project) to request WRAP bins when people cannot get through on the official number. The regional officer, and WRAP centrally, are aware of this problem – ascribed to far higher national demand than expected - and contracted a new company to handle sales in year two after the shortcomings of the company contracted in year one. However, at time of research these problems were still occurring.

Furthermore, some individuals described the helpline as repeating information included in the 'starters pack' they had already received with their bin, and did not believe that operatives "know any more about composting than I do". Moreover, many people indicated that they would be far more likely to turn to friends/family for information regarding how to compost and what to do about 'problems' than an impersonal telephone line. The outsourcing of components of home composting promotion within the WRAP model, while economically viable, do not appear to be conducive with good service delivery, or to a sustained engagement with those people taking up composting for the first time, thus threatening the effectiveness of achieving sustainable increases in the diversion of biodegradable municipal waste.

There is also an issue around the limited funding of WRAP itself, in that, rather than working across the country, the agency set up a competitive tendering scheme for local authorities. This has resulted in not only intra-regional authority division, between those working with WRAP and those not, but more crucially a confusion among the general public as to where to get bins and who to turn to for advice. At public events in Newcastle and other partnership authorities, the regional officer was often approached by people not resident in a partnership authority, and therefore ineligible for the WRAP offer. While the WRAP officer suggested these individuals get in touch with their own local authority – many of whom have started to promote home composting through subsidised bin sales – the geographical boundaries of the initiative act as a barrier to participation in composting. The extra effort needed to get information about getting a bin directly from their local authority were described by some respondents as a deterrent: "that's too much hassle".

6 IMPLICATIONS FOR SUSTAINABLE WASTE MANAGEMENT

6.1 Linking into local networks

Further engagement by WRAP with local networks will be critical in ensuring that the promotion of home composting is more effective. First, developing a stronger relationship with the local authority is important, and this is the responsibility of both NCC and WRAP. Addressing past problems, improving communication and moving forwards will involve work on the part of both partners. Secondly, building links with community groups will be crucial to reaching sections of the public not already 'compost converts'. Previous waste minimisation project experiences around the country show that supermarket presence or leaflet invites to a local event rarely draw interest: WRAP need to redirect resources into face to face trust building with community group 'leaders' or 'key' individuals/organisations, *enabling* the latter to introduce the concept of home composting and promote the bin sales *within their own communities*. The model of 'compost doctors' has been utilised successfully

in other parts of the country, in which a dedicated member of staff develops links with local communities, trains community members as compost 'experts', and supports these 'experts' to encourage, train and offer on-going advice to local people. Initiating such a network has the potential to not only reach more individuals, but improve diversion from landfill more effectively and sustainably. These sorts of informal networks and deliberative processes are important in influencing waste reduction practices at a day-to-day level, and there is a need to facilitate the social space/climate for such processes to develop within policies and schemes for municipal waste management.

As part of the emphasis on local working, WRAP could reconsider its structure in terms of cohesive working. Bringing sales, advice and monitoring into the local sphere may prevent the miscommunication with, and frustration among, the public that result in disinclination to compost. Such work may be beyond the organisational capability of WRAP, but contracting these tasks to local agents (authority, business, community/voluntary sector) would be preferable to faceless corporate bodies with whom there is no scope for the public to build relations of trust, facilitating more of a sense of ownership and dynamism to compost among householders at an everyday level.

6.2 Developing a 'hands on' approach

The research shows that those with a vested interest in home composting (gardeners, the environmentally aware) will undertake the activity enthusiastically, but encouraging the majority of householders to *persevere* with composting is more difficult. Buying a compost bin at a cut-price rate is far more attractive than the day to day activity required to actually compost. The experience of NCC shows that introduction to the realities of compost/ing (informal 'training'), building trust on a personal level and providing on-going support at the local level does incentivise people to persist with composting at home. One means of achieving this would be to re-structure the delivery of WRAP such that the resources currently dedicated to large-scale advertising campaigns are redirected to employ compost officers at the local (as opposed to regional) level. Another, as we have suggested above, is to change tack in the delivery of the scheme and seek to educate and enable key community leaders, so that they in turn can undertake promotional work through local networks and in an informal



Image courtesy of www.recyclenow.com

manner. What this approach enables is the very 'hands on' experience that is shown to be effective, not least by the NCC scheme, both in relation to home compost and in other arenas of changing everyday waste practices, by creating local and trusted 'experts' who are able to offer training and on-going support *in context*, ie. with compost at hand rather than as an abstract idea, providing very real, material support to getting composting right.

6.3 Creating political support

Recognising that waste management is target-driven in the current political climate, there is a need to value home composting activity within waste management auditing. Central government must commit to supporting the 'formula' for counting such activity within diversion rates, and ensure that this formula is applied beyond the WRAP initiative, so that local authorities are encouraged in their promotion of home composting whether it is in partnership with WRAP or not, in order that they have both the political and financial incentives to continue and extend this work. However, in going down this line there is a danger that by adopting the formula – likely to be based on the number of bins *distributed* rather than those *in use* – emphasis within local authority schemes and the WRAP initiative will continue to be on mass distribution and minimal engagement of the kinds recommended above. These elements of promoting home composting – the development of local networks, hands on engagement with individuals and communities – are essential not only to ensure that the impact of home composting schemes is real and sustained, but also because of the ways in which they enable different social norms and expectations around waste generation, minimisation and disposal to develop. Given that these intangible issues are central to the achievement of not only diversion from landfill, but the broader cultural challenge of changing how people think about waste, it is important that local and central government also allow scope for including the 'uncountable' benefits of waste minimisation initiatives such as home composting within their policy frameworks.

7 CONCLUSIONS

As stated in the introduction to this report, the promotion of home composting in Newcastle was one of six initiatives researched for the project *Governing Sustainable Waste Management*. In conclusion, we list here the broader recommendations for managing waste sustainably that have emerged through the study in order to place this case-study within its wider context. While our comments are directed primarily to the local authority level, due to their central role in municipal waste management, we believe that they will also make relevant reading for central government, and the business and community sectors.

7.1 Enhancing the policy framework

- *Critical mass* – the effective delivery of MWP across any one local authority demands a certain number of people and level of resources – a 'critical mass' – to work effectively and proactively across the increasing range of responsibilities that MWP entails.
- *Institutional integration* – progress with the new waste agenda is easiest where waste management is integrated into the local authority; for example, links with active LA21 sections can integrate waste concerns into a broader environmental remit and enrol competencies, such as engagement with the public and voluntary sector, traditionally absent in many waste management sections.
- *Strategic priority* - specifically, a division of responsibilities needs to be established to free up dedicated staff time for strategic issues: identifying and pursuing funding stream; and establishing and maintaining contacts and networks across and beyond the authority. Clearly, any such 'division' needs to be done carefully to maintain suitable integration between strategy and operations.
- *Political support* - committed officers can do much in an ambivalent political environment, but with effective political support, progress can be faster and more far reaching.

- *Active networking* – locally engaging relevant partners, nationally providing links to key gatekeepers, and internationally learning from other local authorities helps to provide critical resources.
- *Embracing change* – a readiness to take on new challenges and to ‘think outside the box’ can yield dividends; this demands the creation of a culture in which there is a willingness to experiment and to take appropriate risks in response to a dynamic policy environment.

7.2 Moving up the waste hierarchy

- *Process alongside progress* – activities such as partnership building, engaging with the public, and developing new channels of communication should be valued by local authorities as much as monitored outcomes, with the recognition that these processes lead to longer term sustainable waste management. It is also important that central government actively support authorities endeavouring to put such mechanisms in place.
- *Rethinking monitoring* – the relevance of re-use and reduction need to be recognised within monitoring regimes, and the ways in which waste is ‘measured’ creatively re-imagined in order to make these behaviours ‘count’. Unless re-use and reduction are brought within the ‘target’ sphere, there remains little incentive for North East authorities to seriously engage with or commit funding to them.
- *The importance of the intangible* – re-considering the social and economic benefits of re-use and reduction will enable authorities and other bodies to bring waste issues into other areas of policy and practice, and address waste more coherently and effectively.
- *Moving beyond formal mechanisms* – recognising the informal networks and deliberative processes through which waste reduction and re-use occur at a day-to-day level, there is a need to enable the social space/climate for them to develop, and encompass informality and discursive engagement within waste management.
- *Challenging waste ‘norms’* – the image of waste as dirty, and secondhand as inferior, must be changed, if as a society we are to really engage with the waste debate, adopt sustainable attitudes towards waste management and alter waste habits. Such a paradigm shift in how waste is imagined may be aided by a move to considering ‘materials’ rather than ‘waste’ as the basis for policy interventions.

For further information about the research project and its findings, please follow the links from: <http://www.dur.ac.uk/geography/research/researchprojects/>

