

6 September 2008

Statement to Full Council Meeting 9/9/08

There has been a lot of misinformation about the West of England plans for dealing with our residual waste. Perhaps the most misleading assertion has been that “nothing has been decided” when it comes to the choice of waste processing technology that the WoE hopes to fund through PFI. If the Partnership continue to use a 160,000-tonne incinerator as their reference project, then that is what we will get – even if the bid is notionally ‘technology non-specific’. Even authorities who have been dead-set on other technologies, have had incineration foisted upon them by the waste industry. So imagine how they will react when we hand them the most lucrative deal we can – they are hardly going to offer us small-scale greener options instead.

If the WoE carries on with the PFI bid, with an incinerator as the reference project, it is important that when the job goes out to tender, we must stipulate that bids are ‘non-technology specific but NOT including incineration’. This is not without precedent. The current Expression of Interest by the Milton Keynes and Northamptonshire Partnership specifies that they want to pursue Energy from Waste, but NOT incineration.

Another misleading impression that has been created, is that the WoE are faced with a choice between ‘tried and tested’ incineration vs experimental, unbankable and unproven pyrolysis. There is a third way forward. A combination of Defra-recommended anaerobic digestion which allows generation of energy from food waste, high recycling and MBT (Mechanical Biological Treatment) would offer a bankable, practical and greener solution. MBT is proven technology that has been funded by PFI in previous rounds of bidding in Cambridgeshire, Lancashire, Wakefield, Leicester, East London, Southwark, Greater Manchester, Cheshire and West Sussex. The current round of bids includes MBT in Norfolk, Bradford, South Tyne & Wear and Cambridge.

Looking at the PFI bids from previous rounds, the WoE proposal looks highly unimaginative and ill thought-out in comparison. A rival bid in this round, again from the Milton Keynes and Northamptonshire Partnership uses as its reference project: 2 Biological Mechanical Treatment plants, 2 in-vessel composting plants, 1 gasification plant and 2 waste transfer stations. After two years of deliberation, all that the WoE Partnership has come up with, is one 160,000 tonne incinerator. Which is almost exactly what Bristol decided to get rid of in the 1990s.

But it’s not just Bristol Friends of the Earth who are concerned about the West of England plans – it’s Defra as well. In their response to the WoE Expression of Interest, Defra has highlighted a number of issues. They have also flagged up the weaknesses in the waste reduction and recycling targets, which aim only to meet national mandatory targets, rather than to excel. Wales and Scotland are setting 70% recycling targets. Bristol stated in its report to the West of England Partnership and Defra that it is just keeping a ‘watching brief’. Defra expect to see Anaerobic Digestion considered, and CHP (combined heat and power) to be delivered in any Energy from Waste by incineration plant. The current reference project does not include CHP. And although officers have assured us that CHP will be included in the Outline Business Case, there is no evidence that any potential CHP customers have been lined-up, and the inclusion of CHP will make any incinerator considerably more expensive than previously estimated.

The most misleading part of this whole process, has been the attempt to rebrand incineration as cleaner and greener; as a great source of renewable energy, and as a tool in the battle against climate change. None of this is true. Incinerators may look smarter and shinier than they used to, but they still produce hazardous fly ash and they still emit dioxins and other particles that are a danger to human health. They do not produce renewable energy – they just displace one fossil fuel with another, and deny us the greater overall energy benefit that comes from reuse or recycling. Instead of improving our climate change impacts, incineration is one of the worst waste disposal methods that we could consider.

Incineration may be tried and tested, but it has been found wanting. It is expensive and unreliable, and it does not deliver.

Just a few recent news stories:

The waste contractors for the Sheffield incinerator persuaded the council that any over capacity in their facility could be taken up with commercial and industrial waste. This was largely made up of recyclable paper, cardboard and plastic, and burned too hot for the incinerator, so the operators had to feed the waste in more slowly, meaning that they lost gate fees. They have now gone back to Sheffield council and have asked to bring in household waste from a larger area instead. This changes the planning conditions attached to the site, and puts the Council in competition with other authorities for a shrinking waste market.

Cllr Keith Ferrin (Con), Kent County Council's cabinet member for the environment, has admitted that closing Allington incinerator would be "better for tax payers". KCC is losing up to £1 million a year because of its long-term contract with Kent Enviropower to burn 320,000 tonnes of waste a year. The contract is forcing the council to send increasingly valuable recyclable material to the incinerator to burn rather than allowing them to get their full market value for their recyclates.

MP Norman Baker has written to the auditor of East Sussex County Council's accounts, demanding a formal investigation into the way in which the contract for the Newhaven incinerator has been handled. The cost of the incinerator has doubled since work began in 2003. The contractors, though tied-in to bearing the additional costs, threatened to pull out of the project midway through construction, and in order to keep the project going, the local Council agreed to grant them an additional 5 years' contract on top of the 25 years already agreed. This cost the Council £25 million.

Neath Port Talbot Council has launched a £54 million lawsuit against the consultants who provided technical advice on the Crymlyn Burrows incinerator. Will Watson, corporate director for the environment at Neath Port Talbot council, said: "The council is seeking damages following the failure of the materials recycling and energy centre to achieve anything like its contracted performance levels, particularly in terms of diverting waste from landfill...." The case will be tried in Bristol.

It is clear to us that Defra has a range of very valid concerns that mirror those that Bristol Friends of the Earth have raised with officers, councillors and the WoE partnership during, and since the Rubbish or Resource consultation of March 2007. We have accessed expert advice to offer this perspective and would suggest that the Council recognises and acts upon these legitimate concerns which are going to affect the ability of the WoE and therefore BCC to bid successfully for PFI funding. The current proposals are inflexible, inappropriate, do not utilise the best available technology, and do not offer the best environmental option.