



Edwin Poots, Environment Minister.

# Time to rethink waste

As Northern Ireland potentially faces fines of up to £500,000 per day, Environment Minister Edwin Poots says now is the time for everyone to rethink waste. As he highlights below the steps his department is taking to address the issue, he says businesses, householders and the community must reduce the amount of waste sent to landfill.

An unexpected upside of the current recession has been to focus minds on how we can do more with the resources we have at our disposal and this includes waste.

The global economy has changed radically in recent years. The planet's resources are becoming ever more valuable. And waste is no exception.

I want to present you with a snapshot of the efforts we are making to get the most from waste management – or as I prefer to refer to it – resource management.

Across Northern Ireland, the public and private sectors are working in partnership to transform the methods we use to handle our waste and to change our attitudes to prevention and re-use. This partnership is delivering innovations that I believe will yield real benefits for householders and businesses alike.

The key drivers for better waste management are the EU Landfill Directive and the Revised Waste Framework Directive. Basically these Directives mean that it is becoming increasingly difficult to bury our rubbish in the ground. The Landfill Directive sets targets for member states to reduce the amount of biodegradable municipal waste (BMW) sent to landfill.

Every ratepayer in Northern Ireland has an interest in meeting these targets as failure will result in fines that could run to millions of pounds per annum – fines that would ultimately be borne by you.

The Revised Waste Framework Directive also includes recycling targets for both household and construction and demolition waste. We can no longer ignore the value in our waste.

One of my key goals is to reduce the amount of waste going to landfill. Intuitively, as well as environmentally and economically, it is wrong to bury valuable resources in the ground, particularly when landfill is also one of the most inefficient and environmentally damaging ways to deal with our waste.

In 2005 the Northern Ireland Landfill Allowance Scheme (NILAS) translated the Landfill Directive targets into annual allowances for each council area in Northern Ireland.

Since then, our 26 councils, operating through their three waste management groups, have collectively reduced the amount of BMW sent to landfill by 15 per cent.

However, the landfill targets become progressively more challenging. By 2020 the amount councils are allowed to send

to landfill under NILAS will fall dramatically from 470,000 tonnes in 2010 to 220,000.

We can achieve this target but only through a combination of waste prevention, increased recycling and appropriate waste infrastructure provision.

## Waste prevention, re-use and recycling

I am pleased that Northern Ireland's household recycling rates have increased dramatically from 4.9 per cent in 1999 to 34.4 per cent in 2008-2009. However, we cannot be complacent - much more progress is required to deliver the EU statutory target of 50% by 2020. I want to look at even more challenging targets in Northern Ireland.

The need for greater resource efficiencies has driven prevention to the top of the waste hierarchy. This takes us far beyond landfill diversion towards increased prevention, re-use, recycling, sustainability and much better management of our resources.

This is a mammoth task and one that cannot be achieved without changing our perceptions of waste.

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To this end, I have introduced a number of key initiatives to encourage best practice in the areas of waste prevention, re-use and recycling.

In March, I launched my department's new waste prevention website [www.rethinkwasteni.org](http://www.rethinkwasteni.org)

The Rethink Waste site has a core aim of bringing about behavioural change among consumers, businesses and the community and education sectors with vital information. The site also acts as a portal and signpost to partner organisations, with a focus on sharing best practice on the reduce, re-use and recycle themes.

The development of this website was the first step in my department's Rethink Waste campaign. Other steps include awareness raising events to encourage people to “rethink waste” and the Northern Ireland version of the ‘Love Food Hate Waste’ campaign which specifically targets food waste.

Backing up this approach is our Rethink Waste Fund. Currently standing at over £3 million, this fund will make grants available to local councils for schemes (which may be in partnership with others) which support waste recycling, re-use and diversion from landfill.

Apart from the obvious environmental benefits of implementing such schemes, there are also economic gains with outputs to include high quality recyclables that can be used by local reprocessors or sent for export. This demonstrates the waste sector's capability to generate and sustain jobs, income and profits – more important now than ever before.



Environment Minister Edwin Poots launching the Department of the Environment's new waste prevention website [www.rethinkwasteni.org](http://www.rethinkwasteni.org), marking the first step in its Rethink Waste campaign.

Some local companies are already rising to the challenge and in recent months we have heard several positive announcements from private sector businesses that use recycled material in their manufacturing processes.

Growing the economy is the top priority for the Northern Ireland Executive. Therefore when more and more people understand that waste is a valuable resource we will be in a better position to sustain a more dynamic economy. I firmly believe that the pursuit of environmental and economic goals are complementary activities.

I also believe that in pursuing those goals we have to be mindful of the reality that whilst we continue to make excellent progress in waste prevention, it will not eliminate waste altogether.

### Waste Infrastructure Programme

My department's Waste Infrastructure Programme has a vital role to play in delivering the necessary infrastructure to process the residual waste that does not lend itself to re-use or recycling.

In his role as Director of the Waste Programme Delivery Support Unit (PDSU), Alan McVicker agrees with the philosophy underpinning this approach: “Processing this residual waste in the most efficient, effective and sustainable way possible requires the introduction of a range of mechanical, biological and



Alan McVicker, Director, PDSU.

thermal technologies, all of which are subject to stringent planning and environmental controls.”

Alan is responsible for ensuring that Northern Ireland's three waste management groups have access to the specialist support they need to deliver the most appropriate mix of technologies for their councils' area.

He also serves on a number of governance structures designed to support delivery of both recycling and recovery facilities, and this reflects the partnership ethos that I am fostering across a number of waste management areas. All key central and local government and industry stakeholders will be represented on the new Waste Programme Board, which I will be chairing.



Environment Minister Edwin Poots at the launch of the multi-million pound Rethink Waste fund to boost recycling. The Minister is pictured with Jim Shields (R), Waste Manager, Belfast City Council at Ormeau Household Waste Recycling Centre in Belfast.

This collaborative approach, alongside the financial support made available by the Executive through the Strategic Waste Infrastructure Fund, will continue to support the three waste management groups' procurements. These are all scheduled to reach contract award in 2011. The total value of the procurements is in excess of £500 million. This means that they will generate significant employment opportunities in both the construction and operational phases, as well as enabling compliance with landfill diversion targets and avoiding substantial fines for non-compliance.

When I became Minister for the Environment, my intention was to ensure that existing momentum was maintained and built on. The leadership and direction provided by my department, with support in key areas from the Strategic Investment Board, I believe will produce tangible results.

Looking ahead, it is clear that we face a period of rapid and potentially difficult change. You may have seen the press coverage of the illegal sites in our border areas in recent weeks, and there won't be many of us who haven't spotted fly-tipped waste somewhere when out and about. While we focus on waste

prevention, re-use and recycling, it is important that we also deal effectively with landfill and develop a holistic approach to handling various waste streams including commercial and industrial and excavation and demolition waste.

I am currently taking forward the Waste and Contaminated Land Bill. This contains provisions designed to create a partnership approach between councils and my department in tackling illegal waste activity. The Bill gives councils broadly the same powers as the department in relation to the investigation and prosecution of illegal waste offences.

One of the first things that I addressed when I came in to office was the Clean Neighbourhoods and Environment Bill. This will impact on general waste prevention and will also raise awareness of the benefits of cleaner local neighbourhoods. The Bill helps councils deal more effectively with a wide range of day-to-day problems that impact negatively on the quality of life across Northern Ireland. I believe that councils are best placed to deal with this so this Bill will strengthen their legal powers to deal with litter, graffiti, fly-posting and a range of related issues.

To sum up, this is an exciting and challenging time for waste management in Northern Ireland. The establishment of the Rethink Waste Fund; the steady progress of local government in its major waste infrastructure procurements; and the heightened focus on research and communication have all been underpinned by recognition of the benefits of a partnership approach.

In light of this I have established a new Waste Programme Board that provides a forum for engaging stakeholders across the spectrum of waste activity, including the private sector.

This means that key strategic drivers identified in the next phase of review and delivery of the Northern Ireland Waste Management Strategy and the Waste Directives can be reflected in appropriate objectives and targets. It will also ensure that sound social, environmental and economic principles will support the underlying policy put in place to help achieve those objectives.

As I said at the beginning everyone has to play an active part if Northern Ireland is to achieve the necessary changes to comply with the high standards set across the EU. Essentially we are all stakeholders in managing our waste – householders, businesses and the community – but I am confident that through continuing to working together we will produce real results that will help us succeed.

*For more information please visit:*

[www.rethinkwasteni.org](http://www.rethinkwasteni.org)

[www.wastepdsu.org](http://www.wastepdsu.org)

*Information on each of Northern Ireland three waste management groups can be found at:*

[www.arc21.org.uk](http://www.arc21.org.uk)

[www.northwestwaste.org.uk](http://www.northwestwaste.org.uk)

[www.swamp2008.org.uk](http://www.swamp2008.org.uk)

