

OGP briefing notes: Waste and recycling

Oxfordshire County Council says it is serious about putting a hierarchy of “reduce, reuse, repair, recycle, burn for energy, dispose” into practice – among other things, this makes economic sense, as dealing with waste is extremely costly (£42 million per year in Oxfordshire).

The council can be given credit for its aim of working towards a circular economy: an economic system aimed at eliminating waste and the continual use of resources. Circular economy systems employ reuse, sharing, repair, refurbishment, remanufacturing and recycling to create a closed-loop system, minimising the use of resource inputs and the creation of waste, pollution, and carbon emissions.

Oxfordshire residents are among the best in the country at recycling, even though they produce about a tonne of waste per household per year (considered a comparatively low rate!). Over 57% of all waste is reused, composted or recycled, compared to the national rate of 45%. However, this is still a pitifully small percentage. It is particularly important to find a solution to the increasing quantities of single-use plastics and electronics entering the waste stream, which are polluting and difficult to recycle.

About a fifth of all household waste collected at the kerbside is food, of which half is separated for recycling. If the other half, that ends up in the general waste bin, was also recycled, it would save the council around £2m a year in disposal costs. In districts where food waste is collected separately (rather than being collected with garden waste) it goes to the Agrivert anaerobic digester at Cassington to be converted into bio-fertiliser for local farms, and the methane given off is captured to generate electricity for the National Grid.

Recyclables are traded on a global market and China’s decision in 2017 to reduce the amount of contaminated recycling arriving in the country has put pressure on the UK to seek new markets. Further, the recent publicity given to the mountains of waste, ostensibly for recycling, that have accumulated in other poorer countries that are ill equipped to deal with it, has exposed major problems with the global recycling system. The UK needs to develop its own recycling industry.

The majority of waste that can’t be recycled or composted is sent to Viridor’s Ardley Energy Recovery Facility. Here 95% of non-recyclable waste is incinerated and generates enough electricity for about 38,000 homes. While energy from waste is preferable to sending waste to landfill, it must be a temporary solution: the waste should not be produced in the first place, and even if the toxins produced by burning are removed, CO₂ is still produced.

Oxfordshire still sends bulky items (mattresses, furniture, PVC window frames) to landfill, and also still accepts landfill from outside the county. As well as being polluting and wasteful, this is also very costly for the county (landfill tax is £94.15 per tonne).

70% of all waste is treated, processed, or disposed of within Oxfordshire, and 80% within the UK. However, of the waste sent overseas, around 16% goes to India, Indonesia and

China, and this should be stopped as soon as possible: we should not be exporting our waste, especially to countries that do not have adequate facilities to recycle it.

(See Oxfordshire's Resources and Waste Strategy at https://www.oxfordshire.gov.uk/sites/default/files/file/waste-and-recycling/OxfordshiresResourcesandWasteStrategy_0.pdf)

What Greens need to do

- Not lose sight of our long-term goal of zero waste.
- Encourage systems for returnable bottles, reusable and uniform packaging, etc.
- Promote repair cafes, "libraries of things", and rental rather than ownership for major items, such as car clubs.
- Hold the County Council and district authorities to account on waste reduction and make suggestions for improvement.
- Continue to educate the public about the importance of waste reduction, and of cleaning recyclables so that they are not rejected because of contamination. Develop positive ideas to stop people littering and fly tipping.
- Campaign for a uniform system of collecting recyclables across the country so that there is no confusion when people move between different areas.
- Campaign for the government to investigate a Natural Resource Tax and continue to combat built-in obsolescence.