

Dyfodol Cynaliadwy
Sustainable Futures

Cyfarwyddwr Cyffredinol • Director General

Darren Millar AM
Chair of the Public Accounts Committee
National Assembly for Wales
Cardiff Bay
Cardiff
CF99 1NA



Llywodraeth Cymru
Welsh Government

Our Ref/Your Ref:

14 March 2012

Dear Mr Millar,

RE: PUBLIC PARTICIPATION IN WASTE RECYCLING

Thank you for your recent letter to Gill Morgan about the Wales Audit Office Report Public Participation in Recycling. The Permanent Secretary has asked me to respond in my recently assumed capacity as additional accounting officer with responsibility for Sustainable Futures.

I note that the Committee does not intend to launch a formal inquiry. You ask five questions. The answers to these are set out below.

1. The Welsh Government has taken and proposes to take further action to reduce waste production. Local authorities are of course the statutory authorities to collect and deal with waste. The Welsh Government has provided advice and additional funding to help them reduce waste as well as increase recycling and sustainable waste management generally. Specific examples include the reduction of the capacity of residual waste receptacles to promote recycling, the move towards fortnightly residual waste collections, the introduction of food waste collections and the promotion of re-use of furniture, clothing, white goods and other items. This advice to local authorities is now encapsulated in the Welsh Government's Collections Blueprint published in March 2011 which supports the objectives set out in the Municipal Sector Plan also published in March 2011. The Plan and Blueprint reflect policy developments in sustainable waste management which have been under discussion with local authorities since 2007 and move policy on from the position set out in the first Welsh Government waste strategy Wise About Waste published in 2002.

At the moment we have no further specific legislative proposals. As you know, the higher recycling targets were set out in the Waste (Wales) Measure 2010. Targets for waste reduction through to 2050 are set out in the Welsh Government's waste strategy Towards Zero Waste. To help deliver on these targets the Welsh Government is working on actions, along with the other UK administrations and the EU, to tackle waste arisings at source, for example in the retail supply chain. The Welsh Government already supports the Courtauld agreement with the major UK grocery chains and action on better eco-design to reduce packaging. Further proposals were set out in the draft Food, Marketing, Services and Retail Sector Plan which was launched for consultation in March 2011 and is scheduled to be published by the Summer. Following responses to this Plan and other Sector Plans, Ministers will be considering a range of possible measures to reduce waste and increase recycling in both the public and private sectors for inclusion in the forthcoming Environment Bill.

2. The Welsh Government has been working with local authorities to increase public participation in waste recycling since the first waste strategy was published in 2002. I hope you will recognise that as a result of this action Wales now has the highest recycling rate of the four UK nations and is well on the way to achieve the first of the new statutory recycling targets of 52% in 2012/13. The recycling rate in the last quarter for which data is available, June – August 2011, was 49%, up from 6.6% in 1999/2000. The Welsh Government continues to work closely with local authorities through Waste Awareness Wales, which is funded by the Welsh Government, to promote public participation. Recent survey results indicate we have been very successful in promoting attitudinal change in relation to recycling with 94% of people in Wales saying that recycling is very or fairly important to them. Compared to the other UK nations, people in Wales are significantly more aware of, and likely to use, kerbside recycling services and awareness of food waste recycling services is much higher in Wales (88%) than in any other region (42% - 67%). We and local authorities are now working to convert this into behavioural change to increase further separation of materials including food waste and higher recycling. Actions to improve public participation can be incorporated by local authorities in their business plans setting out how they will meet the higher recycling targets, which they are being encouraged and supported to produce as part of the collaborative waste 'change programme' launched by the Welsh Government in Summer 2011. At the moment, no further legislative proposals are envisaged, subject as I say to any proposals in the Environment Bill.
3. I am interested that the WAO has told you that it is impossible on current evidence to say that one type of recycling is superior to another. I am aware that this debate is polarised around the relative costs and benefits of kerbside sort collection systems as opposed to co-mingled systems. The Welsh Government takes an evidence based approach to policy making and has published the results of a number of studies setting out the modelling and empirical evidence in respect of different systems. In particular I would refer you to the four reports listed in Annex 1 to this letter.

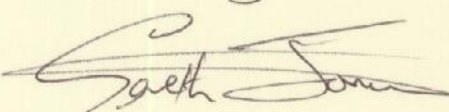
The outcome of studies can of course reflect the inputs and assumptions made in them. The Welsh Government takes a whole life cycle and whole life costings approach in pursuit of its obligation to promote sustainable development and in this regard I would encourage you to look in particular at the Eunomia report *Kerbside Collections Options: Wales January 2011* which sets out the environmental and economic benefits of the different collection systems. Again, we are encouraging local authorities to test out these findings in the circumstances of their own communities in the business plans we are helping them to prepare under the change programme I have referred to above.

Two further important issues will impact on the choice of collection systems by local authorities. Firstly, the thrust of the recent revised EU Waste Framework Directive (rWFD) is in favour of separate collections of at least a minimum of four key materials. The rWFD has been transposed into UK legislation in the Waste (England and Wales) Regulations 2011 although paragraph 13 referring to separate collections is currently subject to a consultation on possible amendment to seek to clarify the requirement for separate collection. When this consultation is concluded and the regulations amended as appropriate, the Welsh Government will be in a better position to offer definitive advice to local authorities about which collections services should be preferred. While there may well be local circumstances which require flexibility in collection services, and the derogations in the rWFD provide for this, the direction of travel is clearly in favour of consistent and separate collection services.

Secondly, financial data developed jointly by local authorities, the WLGA, the Welsh Government and the WAO over the last five years to benchmark the costs of local authority recycling services is now available. This data was recently pulled together in a Wales Audit Office report to the Ministerial Programme Board for waste chaired by the Minister for Environment and Sustainable Development and attended by representatives of local authorities and WLGA as well as Welsh Government and WAO. This report indicated for example, in 2010/11, a six-fold variation between local authorities in the cost of household collections of dry recyclates. In current circumstances of public sector funding this is a situation which requires urgent consideration by local authorities and officials are working with them to promote more sustainable waste management services.

4. I note and agree with the WAO report recommendation. As I say, the Welsh Government is and has been working with local authorities to promote good practice and disseminate the benefits of this to promote public participation in recycling as this will be key to Wales achieving the higher recycling rates. We are currently reviewing with Waste Awareness Wales and the WLGA in the light of the latest research findings, the best ways of doing this. Actions will be set out in the next three year plan for Waste Awareness Wales.
5. I take careful account of the points made in the WAO report about grants for local authority waste services. The financial benchmarking I have referred to above is part of our action on this as we have needed to develop, in conjunction with local authorities and the WAO, a robust data base against which to assess local authority performance. Local authorities are meeting Welsh Government strategic objectives on recycling having met and surpassed the 40% recycling target set out in the initial Welsh Government waste strategy in 2002 and being collectively well on target to meet the first of the new statutory recycling targets. Nevertheless, it is clear that there is more to be done to see how we can meet the targets at a lesser overall cost and drive further value for money benefits alongside better environmental outcomes. Officials will continue to pursue this agenda in collaboration with local authorities themselves and the WAO.

I trust that this letter helps to address the concerns raised by the Committee.

Your sincerely,


Gareth Jones
Acting Director General, Sustainable Futures

Reports to Welsh Government setting out evidence about different collection systems for recycling:

Kerbside Recycling in Wales: Environmental Costs, prepared by Environmental Resource Management Ltd for the Waste and Resources Action Programme, March 2009.

Kerbside Recycling in Wales: Indicative Financial Costs, Waste and Resources Action Programme (WRAP), March 2009.

Ecological Footprint Impacts of the Welsh Waste Strategy: Ove Arup and Partners Ltd, May 2009.

Kerbside Collections Options: Wales, prepared by Eunomia Research & Consulting, Resource Futures and HCW Consultants for the Waste and Resources Action Programme WRAP, January 2011.

Gareth Jones
Acting Director General, Sustainable Futures