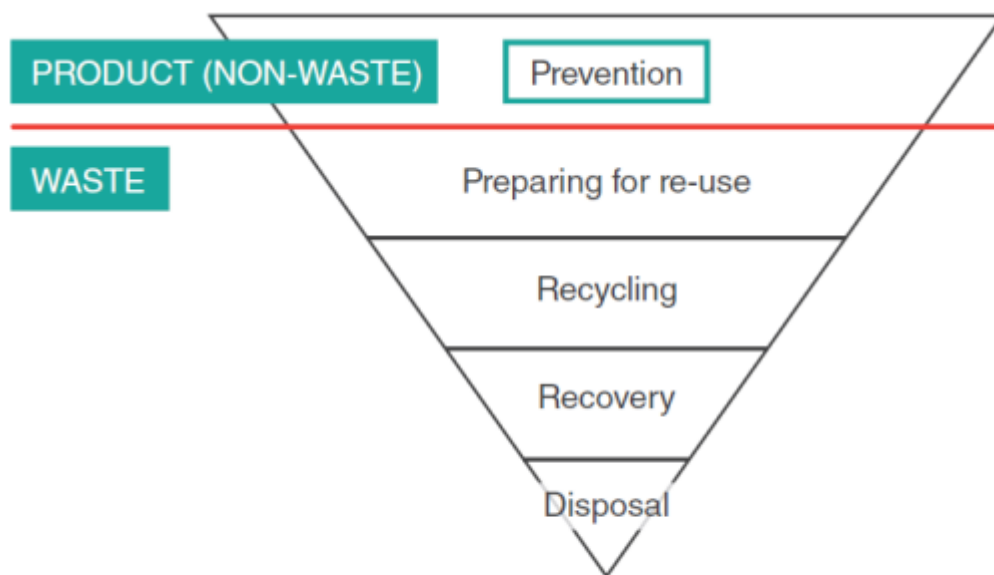


Wales Audit Office / Swyddfa Archwilio Cymru

Is recycling just a load of rubbish?

So, you know how it is. You have just polished off a banana and you need to get rid of the slimy skin. But which bin to put it these days in is a potential banana skin in itself. Now it's easy enough at home but we have been talking in our office about how you get rid of your rubbish when you are at work, in the car or at the gym? And as hard as this is for individuals to work out, it's even harder for workplaces and communities. So imagine how hard it is for Wales as whole to work what to do with its waste.

But what I have been reminded of while working on our waste reports is that the best thing for the environment is to stop generating waste in the first place. One way of thinking about how we deal with waste is the waste hierarchy.



Source: Directive 2008/98/EC on waste (Waste Framework Directive)

This upside-down triangle summarises what it's meant to all be about. The general principle is that the best thing to do with waste is at the top and the worst thing is at the bottom.

Not so long ago, nearly everything we produced in Wales ended up in a landfill site (disposal), but our reports reflect the fact that we are now at least recovering the energy and other bi-products from waste and happily we are recycling more and more. Upcycling has become so popular that there are many blogs and TV programmes dedicated to the art of taking one thing and turning it into something else. These are all

positive moves up the waste hierarchy, but the holy grail is preventing waste in the first place.

In our recent trilogy of reports, we have looked the range of ways that Wales deals with its waste.

The first report looked at residual household waste (black bag waste) and food waste and how Welsh Government has worked with local councils to find alternatives to landfill in Wales. We found that the 'Waste Infrastructure Procurement Programme' had been well-managed and contracts for new waste treatment facilities have reduced the reliance on landfill in recent years. But the projections for these waste treatment projects assume that councils will still need to treat significant volumes of residual waste beyond 2040. This does not match up well with the Welsh Government's overall aspiration for us to have zero residual waste by 2050.

A second report looked at recycling in Wales (specifically all the stuff that councils pick up from our homes etc). We found improving rates of recycling across Wales in recent years and that methods are becoming more consistent and encouraging more people to take part. One area for concern is that the targets aren't measuring what matters most, such as carbon reduction.

In our final report on waste, published last week, we have drawn out the point I made above, that more emphasis is needed on the things at the top of the triangle, specifically preventing waste in the first place. The Welsh Government has set ambitious targets for a reducing waste every year and we found mixed progress in meeting these targets.

So recycling isn't a load of rubbish, but prevention should come first.

I am proud of the fact that we have been able to make recommendations on topics that matter and are relevant for Welsh Government as it looks to revise its waste strategy over the coming months.

About the author

Sian Davies is a performance specialist at the Wales Audit Office and was part of the team delivering the three waste management reports (March 2019).