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Mapping the Politics of Waste



Resources and Waste Strategy still laden with delays

Recent years have seen continued upheaval throughout Government due to both national and international events. As a result of this, since it published the 25-year Resources and Waste Strategy back in 2018, very little has happened to move this strategy forward.

Significant delays to consultation responses (almost three years for consistent collections) have been exacerbated by unclear or absent guidance. Many measures aimed at making the UK a global leader in environmental reform have suffered from lethargic Government action and what would appear to be a subsequent lack of desire to get it done before the next election.

The UK's Deposit Return Scheme (DRS) is in train but has been caught up in the controversy around the Scottish version and its divergence from the plan for the rest of the UK. Scotland will now be forced to implement the UK version, which has been delayed to 2025 because of the cost-of-living crisis. This caused concern in the industry due to investments already made in anticipation.

Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR), the central tenet of the Resources and Waste Strategy, has also been delayed until October 2025 to allow Government to further discuss the scheme's design with industry and reduce administration and implementation costs. The Government explained this decision as being made to ensure that household finances were not impacted, though Defra's lack of capacity to deal with very complex changes will no doubt have also played a part.

After two years of waiting, the Government has recently evolved consistent collections – wrongly dubbed the 'seven bins policy' – into Simpler Recycling, and provided detail on timescales. Across England, people will be able to recycle the same materials, without needing to check what their council will accept for recycling.

Despite this renewed energy from Government towards the Resources and Waste Strategy, details are incomplete, with a further consultation on the new guidance being launched alongside Simpler Recycling. Unfortunately, we expect similar delays and teething issues, and limited concrete progress before the next General Election.

What is behind the 'culture of delay' at Defra?

The Environment Act was a weighty piece of legislation that should have fundamentally changed how the UK tackles waste and resources. While flawed, it was undoubtedly ambitious – in no small part because of the drive of then Environment Secretary, Michael Gove, to reform.

The loss of momentum appears to be down to Michael Gove moving from Defra to Levelling Up, and his replacements seemingly not having similar ambitions. For many years now Defra has been considered a department for those on the way up or on the way down, and there have now been five Environment Secretaries since Michael Gove's departure. As a leading Brexiteer, Michael Gove is thought to have been appointed to sort out post-Brexit matters. As a committed reformer, he wanted to shake things up, and there has not been the same drive from his successors.

Without this force of character, and the understandable concentration of Defra resources on food security issues exacerbated by the Ukraine war, the agenda has fallen down the priority list – leading to the Chair of the Environmental Audit Committee describing a "culture of delay" in Defra.

With implementation of most of the Resources and Waste reforms pushed back to after the next election, it will be for the next Government to pick up – though we hope that the new Secretary of State, Steve Barclay, will be ambitious in his time at Defra.



Foreword

The last few years have seen uncertainty and crisis stemming from both national and international factors. Consequently, and perhaps understandably, the Resources and Waste Strategy has suffered delays of implementation. While there has been some clarification from the recent Simpler Recycling guidance, there is still a way to go before a comprehensive reformed system is in place. And with an election on the horizon, further delay is inevitable.

This updated Politics of Waste report examines how far we've come, and how much further we need to go. We also look at what the sector should anticipate in the lead-up to the General Election, given the everchanging political landscape. There is scope for the sector to influence future policy and this opportunity must be seized.

Decarbonising is a matter of choice, adapting to climate change is a necessity. Regardless of whoever is in government after the election, we hope we will see a renewed vigour on environmental policy and a drive towards a circular economy.

Steve Longdon

Chief Executive Officer
FCC Environment

How would a Labour Government affect the sector?

Resources and Waste were probably never going to be a headline issue for Labour as it seeks to position itself as a “Government in waiting”, but recent months have provided insight into its thinking.

At its Party Conference in Liverpool, both Shadow Environment Secretary, Steve Reed and Shadow Waste Minister, Ruth Jones, demonstrated positivity about making progress – with Steve Reed stating that “if [the Resources and Waste Strategy] is an easy win, let’s have it”, and indicating that Labour will look at progress made on recycling in Wales to guide its policy.

More recently, Ruth Jones shared her concerns that the UK is going backwards in terms of the circular economy. She also called for a more

holistic approach rather than the piecemeal system being produced at present.

Acknowledging the potential that adoption of circular economy business models has to boost the UK economy by around £75 million in gross value added, Ruth Jones said that getting this in place is a priority for the next Labour Government.

Crucially, the two key Labour spokespeople for the sector are both genuinely interested in our issues, with Steve Reed having previously been leader of a local authority in London.



Net Zero and Energy

Prime Minister signals less urgency on net zero

In September 2023, Prime Minister, Rishi Sunak, realigned the Government’s net zero commitments. He sought to reassure that his Government remained committed to net zero by 2050 but wanted to tackle the climate change crisis with a more “pragmatic” approach. Having previously branded the policy shift as “realism”, he stated that the solution to net zero would require “consent not imposition, honesty not obfuscation, pragmatism not ideology”.

It is thought the Prime Minister weakened some of the Government’s key green commitments in an attempt to establish a clear dividing line with the Labour Party on the cost of these green policies ahead of the next General Election.

Framing his decision to U-turn on previous net zero targets as one of courage and honesty, the PM wants to prioritise long-term decisions before short-term choices, even if those come at a political cost. Stating that the UK requires “sensible green leadership”, he wants to move away from two extremes – those who want to abandon net zero and those who want to accelerate it – as both fail to “reckon with the reality of the situation”. He appeared confident that there is a way to adopt a more “pragmatic and realistic” approach which will ease the burden on British households.

The cost-of-living crisis has been impacting not just households and business but also local authorities, so new policies will not lead to further burdens on council and household budgets. It will be interesting to see if Defra can live up



to its renewed commitments to establishing a clear plan to implement its reforms and adhere to new milestones and timescales.

Furthermore, the waste management industry is uniquely placed to offer solutions on both the energy and climate crisis by offering innovative recycling options but also using waste to generate energy to power homes and businesses across the country.



Eliminating waste crime by 2043: a hopeless endeavour?

Waste crime has long been one of the biggest issues that both damages the reputation of the waste sector and impacts the economy. Even the most conservative estimates suggest that waste crime costs £1 billion a year, enough to employ 27,000 nurses.

This year, the Government published further guidance regarding tackling waste crime to ensure the guidance is proportionate but importantly still able to achieve the aim of minimising risk to people and the environment.

Defra has also indicated that tackling waste crime will be supported by the introduction of mandatory recyclability labelling on packaging, which will be introduced as part of EPR in October 2025, though there is still a need for clarity on exactly how it will better tackle organised waste crime.

Challenges and opportunities for the sector

The House of Commons Public Accounts Committee criticised the Environment Agency's approach to waste crime claiming that it had essentially been decriminalised, and the fines were not substantial enough deterrents – instead seen as a necessary cost of business.

As with much of the Government's approach to the waste sector, further measures to tackle it have broadly stagnated – including the introduction of a digital waste tracking system, which has yet to be piloted despite being in development for the last four years.

The overarching sentiment is that, while Defra may propose further financial penalties and regulatory measures, this is still insufficient to ensure there is a well-funded and efficient regulator with the power to appropriately tackle the issue. The sector must carry on lobbying for better regulation and calling for more resources to ensure effective enforcement.

At FCC Environment, we partnered with the Local Authority Recycling Advisory Committee (LARAC) to poll its members on their views of tackling waste crime. 95% of respondents said that the Environment Agency has insufficient enforcement funding to effectively tackle waste crime and is not taking enough enforcement action. 91% said their local authority does not have enough resources and capacity to effectively tackle waste crime, while 77% do not believe the Government can meet its 2043 target for eliminating waste crime.



Devolution matters

The UK's complex political system means that the national governments and administrations of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland are empowered to set their own policies on issues including waste and resources.

Never has this been more in the spotlight than in the disputes over Scotland's DRS proposals – which resulted in the UK Government imposing its own proposals on the Scottish Government, and a significant delay, just months before it was due to launch. This provoked criticism of the influence that the Green Party – the junior coalition party in the Scottish Government – has over the SNP.

The SNP's fortunes have been transformed (and not for the better) in recent months, dropping in the polls and facing losses at the General Election. They will hope that a Labour Government will be less adversarial than the current Government as they seek to progress their green agenda – including the ban on landfill and mooted ban on new EfW plants.

In Wales, their ambitious plans to become a circular economy and have zero waste by 2050 will see them be highly influential if Labour wins: the Shadow Defra Secretary has said that Labour will learn from its Welsh counterparts on recycling.

Currently only the Mayor of Greater Manchester, Andy Burnham, has powers over waste and recycling but, with the prospect of further powers being devolved to more regions, it's possible that this could become more common. This would have significant implications for the size of the sector.

Challenges and opportunities for the sector

While there are no elections in Scotland and Wales until 2026, the next few years will be crucial for the reputation of the devolved administrations. In Scotland, the SNP will be hoping to steady the ship, while in Wales the Labour administration will hope that a UK Labour Government will give it new found influence.

Although the SNP has recently suffered in the polls, the prospect of Scottish Independence remains a live issue – with the SNP stating the next General Election will be a 'de facto referendum'. Polling has generally seen small leads for 'No' to independence, but much can change in the coming years.

Election uncertainty hinders business planning

It is widely expected that a General Election will be held in 2024, with the exact date dependent on how the Prime Minister feels regarding his five key priorities.

The most recent rumour is that it will take place on Thursday 31st October 2024 (expect plenty of Halloween-based headlines) the day after, but there is also talk of a May 2024 and even January 2025 election. The latter, the latest it could be held, will likely be the last resort.

This, tied with significant Labour leads in the polls, means it is hard for businesses to plan for the future. While Labour has led for around 200 polls in a row, with leads of 15 to 20 percentage points, the scale of the challenge they face is considerable. To even get a small majority, Labour would need a swing of 9.9% - more than Tony Blair achieved when he won a 179-seat majority in 1997.

With Labour's poll lead likely to tighten as we approach the election, there is a possibility that Labour may well be the largest party but without a majority, which could have business and economic impacts – as could the possibility of a second election shortly after.

The environment will be a major election issue – YouGov's tracker of public views on the country's most important issues puts the environment fourth overall (third amongst Labour voters) but the main two parties will have different approaches. The Conservatives will take a more cautious approach, as they have with net zero, urging

restraint so it does not impact public finances. Labour will champion it as an economic driver and job creator as part of a new industrial revolution.

Challenges and opportunities for the sector

Elections provide opportunities to raise a sector's profile with future parliamentarians: candidates will want to know about what's going on in their potential constituencies, and are always interested in visits that involve PPE.

Understanding the priorities and attitudes of a new Government is important. There is currently limited information on Labour's position on waste and resource issues. They will want to demonstrate action, and Labour MPs are likely to be more interventionist on reducing waste. Recent polling for Cavendish Consulting by YouGov shows that 85% of Labour MPs would favour banning disposable vapes, while 72% would back intervention to reduce the use of single-use plastics – 39% would even back intervention on cardboard packaging.

The next 12 months will feature significant political uncertainty, and the sector will need to try to influence what comes next – whenever and whatever that might be.





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