



## **Response to E-Politix Forum Brief on Waste management: Controlling the UK waste mountain**

By Caroline Cohen

*“Waste in the UK continues to rise at 3% per year – faster than GDP and faster than in most other nations. The waste mountain will double by 2020 adding £1.6 billion per year to waste disposal costs. Future UK and EU legislation will require us to reverse this trend and reduce our waste by two thirds. Please send me your views”.*

Controlling the amount of waste produced is a real challenge for the UK and requires the development of a strategic, integrated and coherent approach to waste management, involving all stakeholders. It is important to consider all waste streams in an even way. So far, great emphasis in the UK seems to have been put on municipal waste - which represents 6% of UK total waste – to the detriment of other waste streams.

Innovative policies carried out in some European countries engage both consumers and industry in waste minimisation activities. Germany, for instance, has recently introduced an obligatory deposit system for drinks packaging which includes charging for non-recyclable packaging, and excludes ecologically friendly packaging such as recycled beverage cartons. The Environment Minister, Juergen Trittin, has stressed the merit of a dual strategy aimed at both consumers and commerce. This kind of initiative can also be praised for promoting eco-design, which can play a key role in reducing the initial generation of waste. It is thus important to ensure that such partnerships between stakeholders become the norm when developing programmes and initiatives to address particular aspects of waste management. The involvement of local communities in recycling activities, for example, is highly dependent on the degree of information they are provided with about waste management options and the impact of current waste practices onto the environment. The success of any waste management strategy in the UK is also strongly dependent on the lead given by central government and other public sector bodies acting as leaders in sustainable waste management. Waste prevention through green procurement practices and real waste policy integration and implementation between departments in government would send a strong signal to business and householders that a cultural change was possible.

Waste prevention, rather than waste recycling or reprocessing, should be the prime target of all government strategies aimed at holistic waste management in the UK. Waste prevention, however, requires a fundamental shift in the way in which people, whether as householders or

as employees, think about the behaviours which generate waste, such as purchasing and procurement, and change those behaviours to ensure waste prevention occurs. Such a basic cultural change is likely to be generational, and may also conflict with changing business models such as the increasing move towards convenience food, fast consumerism in fashion and other recent developments. The Strategy Unit Report "*Waste Not, Want Not*" advocates a cultural shift in waste management practices across the board. It is important to raise awareness and understanding about waste issues among the public. Awareness raising needs to focus not only on the basics of recycling, but also on these more fundamental questions of consumerism and the increasing trend towards "throwaway" purchasing.

The rise of the landfill tax level from £13 to £35 reflects the government's commitment to divert waste from landfill and promote more sustainable waste treatment methods. To further the development of an effective infrastructure, the government must create the necessary incentives to enhance market opportunities for recyclates and ensure that material recovery becomes the most competitive solution for waste 'disposal' management. People must see tangible benefits from such actions, as *rewards* for more holistic and sustainability directed waste management would underline the benefits society could achieve from behaving in a more responsible manner. Therefore, financial benefits from waste prevention or from materials diverted from waste to re-enter the supply chain could be diverted into creating more employment, supporting the education system, public transport or any other social provision that would help to improve the quality of life for society as a whole.