

Cover Note: WR0211 “Unlocking the Potential of Community Composting”

It should be noted that when this report was commissioned, and at the time when much of the research was undertaken, the Waste Strategy for England 2007 underpinned the then Government's approach to waste policy. In July 2010, a full review of waste policies in England was announced with the aim of setting a new, long term strategic direction for waste policy, including goals for 2014 and 2020, replacing the previous strategy. This is due to report in June 2011. Through the ongoing review of waste policies, the Government is investigating ways to remove unnecessary barriers to civil society activity, in line with its ambitions on building a Big Society. The report should therefore be read with this caveat.

Project Aim

The main aim of this research project was to evaluate the extent of the contribution the community composting sector can make towards Defra's waste related targets and to Government's more broadly based environmental and social objectives. This research did not investigate the role of commercial (sometimes known as centralised) composting, nor did it attempt to make comparisons between the community and commercial composting sectors. A secondary aim was the creation of a web-based toolkit/guide for community composting groups on how to get started with identifying and evaluating the outcomes of their activities.

The information that appears in this report was sourced from a 2006 postal survey of the sector as well as through workshops with key stakeholders of the community composting sector (community composting groups, workers, volunteers, local authorities, support agencies, users) and as such the report represents their opinions.

Project Timing

The bulk of the research for this project was completed in late 2008 resulting in the publication of an interim report which contained all the outcomes from the survey (now Annex 1 of the Final Report). The Final Report and remaining annexes however, took longer to complete following several rounds of reviews. This coincided with the consultation and resulting publication of the revised Environmental Permitting Regulations 2010 which changed the extent of the exemption from the need for an environmental permit. It was therefore considered pertinent to do further work on the Final Report to reflect the likely impacts of the EPR 2010 on the industry and on the results of the project.

The revised waste exemption for composting

In most instances, any facility composting animal by-products (including food waste) must be approved by Animal Health under the Animal By-Products Regulations (ABPR). The ABPR limits the risk of animals coming into contact with the composted/stored materials (and thus limits the risk of diseases such as foot and mouth). However, sites composting any waste are also subject to the permitting requirements of the EU Waste Framework Directive the principal objective of which is to prevent harm to human health and the environment. The Directive also provides for exemptions from the need for a permit providing general rules are laid down in respect of each activity on the types and quantities of waste allowed and other

conditions. Therefore, EPR 2010 limits the amount of food waste that can be treated and stored at an exempt composting site to 80 tonnes at any one time when carried out at the place where the waste is produced or is to be used and 60 tonnes elsewhere. The exemption also limits the amount of food waste that may be handled to 10 tonnes within the above totals. Sites that exceed these limits or compost wastes which not are allowed in the rules of the exemption will either have to apply for an environmental permit under EPR 2010 or else restrict their operation to meet the rules of the exemption. Applicants for permits are usually required to undertake a risk assessment to demonstrate that the site will not pose an unacceptable risk to health and the environment.

The Report contains discussion of how this food waste limit might affect the community composting sector and it seems that although the industry would like to see this limit increased, at the time of writing the report only 4 community composting groups were actually affected by it.

The sector's contribution to landfill diversion targets

The contribution of the community composting sector to overall landfill diversion targets is small, but the project found that some sites within the sector provide a significant local service. In addition to biodegradable waste diverted from landfill the sector also delivers social and other benefits, which contribute to Government's wider policy agendas of improving local communities and developing well-being. For example: diverting biodegradable waste from landfill, improving the quality of local soils and maintaining green spaces; providing volunteering opportunities; bringing the community together and working with children to teach them about waste and recycling issues.

Web-based evaluation toolkit for community composters

An important output from the project has been a web-based toolkit / guide for groups on how to get started with identifying and evaluating the outcomes of their community composting activities (www.valuingcommunitycomposting.org.uk). The guide includes first-hand practical illustrations of the tools and techniques used with project case study groups, illustrated through film footage, photos and words from the stakeholders themselves.