

# Rubbish tips dumped in £8bn waste revolution

UK faces 'rude shock' over cost of refuse disposal

Recycling rules baffle councils and public

Over the past 10 days binmen have collected about 3m tonnes of unwanted Christmas presents, packaging and cards, around 750m glass bottles and some 500m cans, as well as tens of thousands of tonnes of uneaten food. They have thrown almost all of it into holes in the ground. But the largest waste company has warned that the days of dumping waste into landfill sites are about to end, at huge extra cost to government, business, local authorities and families.

Peter Jones, a director of Biffa which collects the waste of more than 50 local authorities, says that tighter EU recycling laws and higher landfill taxes will cost up to £8bn - about 10% of the cost of the National Health Service - within years. By 2009, Mr Jones expects most counties to have only one landfill site, and a new generation of large industrial composting and waste recovery plants costing several billion pounds.

"The days of chucking waste into holes in the ground are over and the future is hi-tech, efficient, but fiendishly expensive. Instead of chucking 75% of everything we have finished with down a hole for about £12 a tonne, within a few years very little will be landfilled and that will cost two or three times what it costs now. We expect it to cost Britain £5-8bn to deliver an 80% diversion from landfill. Everyone is in for a rude shock."

His warning comes as the Institution of Civil Engineers publishes a stark report saying the UK needs a level of investment similar to that required to set up the motorway network and the electricity grid, to provide new facilities to handle and process waste. It puts the price at £10bn.

Peter Gerstrom, vice-chairman of the institutions waste management board said: "It will be like putting in sewage treatment works for the first time, but the government is going to have to bite the bullet."

The government is to publish a draft strategy on waste this month. The waste revolution is already leading to confusion and some desperation as the government struggles to meet EU directives, councils try to recycle more waste to avoid fines and households grapple with recycling.

Last month the Department of Trade and industry was embarrassed for the third time in 18 months when it again delayed implementing the European Waste electric and electronic directive, claiming industry was not ready. The laws, expected to come into force this year, will force manufacturers to take back and re-cycle everything from toasters and televisions to computers and mobile phones.

Within a year other laws will require all vehicles and batteries to be recycled, and even shredded tyres will be stopped from going to landfill. The EU is proposing a "life cycle thinking" approach to all materials, which means looking at their environmental impact across their entire life cycle. "Local authorities are dazed and confused," says Simon Aldridge, director of a small London waste collection and recycling company. "They are getting desperate. Some will be made bankrupt if they don't start re-, cycling more soon."

Many areas, especially Labour controlled ones in large Cities, are failing badly to get people to recycle. In London, 25 out of 37 boroughs failed to meet their recycling targets in 2004 and stand to be fined a total of more than £31m. Fines across London could increase to £100m a year by 2009. League tables from the Department of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs will show that the best recycling authorities are in East Anglia. St.Edmundsbury council, which covers Bury St Edmunds, is believed to top the list and last year reached the 50% recycling mark.

But the plethora of brown and green boxes, kerbside collection schemes and alternate week collections is confusing the public, too. Without a national scheme, each council has devised its own recycling scheme, and waste companies and small community schemes are competing for rubbish.

With five government departments responsible for waste and different definitions of what is waste and what can be exported, organised crime is said to be about to move into the chaotic recycling industry, says Mr Jones. "No one has any idea of where the waste is going. No one is laying down standards about what is sorted. You can stick it in a container and ship it out and make a huge profit.

Several councils are introducing lotteries to encourage people to recycle, while others employ people to go from door to door to advise households.

Other local authorities are getting tough. Barnet in north London threatens people with £1,000 fines if they do not re-cycle. Thetford borough council, which covers 53,000 homes in East Anglia, has issued more than 500 "red cards" after which rubbish may not be picked up. The council had to ask police to escort binmen to an estate where a household refused to recycle.

The waste revolution is expected to move up a gear this year, with the landfill tax rising and new laws being introduced.

"Doing nothing is not an option. By 2020 instead of being left to rot in the ground in perpetuity, most of our waste will have to be processed on an industrial scale", says Mr Jones.