



# 'March of the incinerators' threatens drive to recycle more rubbish

Rise in number of plants burning waste may be disincentive to greener methods of disposal

**Jamie Doward** and Taytula Burke  
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Workers sort recycling at Greenstar Recycling facility at Aldridge near Walsall. Building more incinerators could be a disincentive to such efforts. Photograph: David Sillitoe for the Guardian

A rush to build incinerators to burn waste and break the UK's reliance on landfill is threatening the country's commitment to increase its recycling rates.

As new figures reveal that recycling rates have fallen for the first time in 30 years, experts warn that the UK is in danger of building far more incineration capacity than it needs. The controversial waste disposal systems are used to produce electricity and heat for homes and industry. But there are fears that the "march of the incinerators", as some have called it, will act as a disincentive for councils to recycle waste.

Historically, the UK has used landfill as its preferred method for waste disposal and, as a result, has been slower to adopt incineration than other EU states. However, an obligation to meet EU directives has meant that in recent years the UK has been forced to find alternative means of disposal. The directives are yielding results. Just under 47 million tonnes of waste was sent to landfill last year, compared with just over 84 million

tonnes in 2001.

This has given a significant fillip to the incineration industry both in the UK and abroad. Much of the UK's waste that ends up being incinerated currently goes to Germany or the Netherlands, where it is burned and used to heat homes. The process is often cheaper than seeking landfill sites in the UK.

Experts said the use of incinerators had consequences for recycling as local authorities were forced to divert waste to feed the plants. "The choice to invest in thermal treatment can hold back recycling efforts," Adam Baddeley, principal consultant at Eunomia, said. "At one level, the money invested in such plant simply isn't available to put into building recycling plants or collection infrastructure. And once you've built an incinerator or gasifier, there's a strong incentive to keep it fed with waste, even if that means keeping on collecting as 'black bag' rubbish, material that would be economically practicable to collect separately for recycling."

Charmian Larke, technical adviser for Cornwall Waste Forum, which unsuccessfully opposed a large incinerator in the south-west, questioned the planning process that resulted in incinerators being approved. "Some of them [planning officers] have spent their entire careers trying to get this incinerator so they are wedded to the idea," Larke said. "But if the council members understood how bad these contracts were, the officers would lose their jobs."

Larke claimed that many of the incinerators were built in poorer areas. "There's a feeling that people who are downtrodden have a harder time getting their act together to object, and hence it's easier to place nasty things next to them."

Julian Kirby, waste resources campaigner at Friends of the Earth, described incinerators as a 19th-century technology used to treat a 20th-century problem. "The growing success of recycling and food waste collections – and the potential to redesign products to cut waste and boost reuse and recycling even more – mean there are few things more pointlessly parasitic on cash-strapped councils than incinerators," Kirby said.

There are now 39 incineration plants in the UK that have either been built are under construction or are at the planning stage, and there are concerns about overcapacity.

"The UK needs sufficient infrastructure to treat our residual waste and divert it from landfill," said Baddeley. "However, with a recycling target of 50% by 2020 and a decline in waste arising, if the large number of planned [incineration] facilities become operational, there is a real risk of us building excess thermal treatment capacity, something we already see in various northern European countries. They over-invested in treatment facilities and are now importing a growing amount of waste, particularly from the UK and Ireland, to fill them."

A spokeswoman for the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs said

sending waste to landfill or incineration should be the last resort. "We have been clear with local authorities that incineration must not compete with recycling or ways of reducing the amount of waste we produce."

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