

# Talking Food

The Food Waste Recycling Action Plan, led by WRAP, is scheduled for publication in early July. So, to coincide with its release, CIWM and WRAP joined forces to host a round table discussion on the subject. **Ben Wood** sat in on the discussions...

**T**he Food Waste Recycling Action Plan (the Plan) has been created to help increase both the supply and quality of household and commercial food waste to the food waste recycling industry and, at the same time, to enable food waste collectors to maximise the amount of food waste collected so that collections can be delivered as cost-effectively as possible.

A steering group has been assembled by WRAP to help oversee the development, adoption and subsequent delivery of the Plan, and its membership comprises representatives from the food waste treatment industry, as well as local authority food and private sector waste collectors and industry bodies. For the round table, the invited representatives were:

- Kristy Blakeborough-Wesson, environmental manager for GWE Biogas Ltd and representing the Association of Anaerobic Digestion Operators (AADO)
- Linda Crichton, head of WRAP's resource management programme
- Paul Vanston, head of waste and resources, South Cambridgeshire & Cambridge City Councils
- Matt Hindle, head of policy, ADBA (Anaerobic Digestion and Bioresources Association)
- Anita Smith, marketing and communications manager, Biogen
- Chris Murphy, deputy chief executive, CIWM (chair).

Linda began by explaining that the Plan had been developed because of feedback from the sector that, while much had been invested in the development of AD infrastructure, the supply of material and collection systems simply weren't matching the increasing capacity of AD. "We needed to look in more detail at the barriers to



*From left to right: Linda Crichton, Kristy Blakeborough-Wesson, Paul Vanston, Matt Hindle and Anita Smith – our Food Waste Recycling Action Plan round table panellists*

collecting more food waste, household and commercial," she added, "and to see if there was a way for the sector to work together to do that." Of course, food waste reduction remains the priority, but where there has to be food waste, the Plan seeks to help find the best options for its treatment and collection.

The Plan has also been developed against the background of a focus on greater collections and recycling consistency, working with Defra Minister, Rory Stewart, and with an eye on the future 50 percent-and-beyond recycling targets, Linda explained.

This event, and therefore this article, won't discuss the contents of the Plan – that you can see elsewhere – but as Chris set out in his initial discussion topic for the panel, this was about looking at the barriers to the collection and recycling of food waste, how those have prevented progress in the past and whether those covered by the Plan (in draft form for these discussions) should have been "weighted", given that some are more "actionable and achievable and can have much more impact" than others?

"Perceived cost is something we come up against a lot," stated Biogen's Anita Smith, kicking off proceedings. "Local authorities think they don't have the budget to introduce separate collections, but in the example of St Albans, it has

worked out it will save £300,000 per year, over an eight-year contract – £2.4m in total – but it does recognise there will be a big initial outlay."

## Share The Information

WHO SHOULD inform local authorities of the costs and savings, asked the chair, and Anita, looking at Paul Vanston, responded: "Local authorities need to share that information amongst themselves... who would you listen to?"

On why this misconception might exist, it was suggested that it could be the large initial outlay and the time it would take to recoup that cost, but as Paul Vanston said, there are three things that drive local authorities: "What does the statutory framework look like; the costs and if there are any potential sharing of them; and local priorities, which is very much based on residents' priorities." Taking all those into account, we can understand why there is a varied picture of food waste collections across the country, he explained. He added that collaboration is key, understanding each other's sectors – and constraints – is important and that we have not yet worked out how to sustain a viable value chain without moving the costs from one provider to the next and ensuring we can deal with

the lows, as well as the highs.

ADBA's Matt Hindle added that he saw a link between the costs and the statutory element, and that what both Government and local authorities decide to do has an impact on the costs for collectors, treaters and the councils over the long-term. "That's where collaboration is needed," he said, "and this process has shown that we can produce some really useful actions and outputs, but it does require that engagement from Defra and at ministerial level as well." He said that the last five years have seen a "real public policy experiment in the UK... where we now see radically different outcomes in terms of availability of food waste collections and building of treatment infrastructure in the devolved administrations compared to England, some of which will be reflected in the Plan itself."

Chris agreed that food waste collections in particular worked well in Scotland and Wales and asked if the difference was due to external funding; because of being a statutory responsibility; because of unitary authorities; or is it, as discussed, a size and scale issue? And is one more impactful than the others, given that it's probably down to a little bit of each of them?

"It's interesting that both those different drivers [the systems in Wales and Scotland] have released the food waste to the market," added Kristy Blakeborough-Wesson, "proving that whether you put pressure on a local authority, it's target driven or a legal requirement... they have upped the food waste that's available hugely. It gives us hope as operators that there are different ways and that if legislation



*Kristy addresses the chair with her comments*



*Chris Murphy brings a smile to the faces of Paul and Matt, as the cameras look on*

is the way forward, there isn't just one legislative order that would be required.

"Coming back to the barriers," Kristy added, "we're getting government agencies telling us that 'there's so much food waste out there, so many AD plants you want to build... it must work, we're going to cut your subsidies', but the last barrier for us is getting that food waste out of the residual bin and doing it without legislation if we can. But it's heartening to see that it has worked if supported by government."

Paul described the situation in Wales as "funded legislation" which, on the issues outlined of statutory requirements versus costs versus local priorities, he says can have a big impact on both costs and priorities, but he described the situation in England, without such funded legislation, as residents having the option to "opt in to recycling". "With so many other services provided by local authorities, including others that are close to the heart of residents [children's service, health services...] with statutory power behind them, we can't be too surprised if kitchen caddies don't quite make it," he said, to the agreement of the panel, with Kristy adding that "people wouldn't be happy with a recycling charge... it just doesn't hold the weight".

## Save As You Recycle

THE PANEL moved onto the topic of pay as you throw (or save as you recycle, as Paul prefers), with Linda stating that any food waste scheme has to be integrated and show no extra costs, citing the earlier St Albans example as a case in point, and that funding is not used to simply "prop up an inefficient service". "You need a business case," Kristy added, "and it's demonstrable that there will be for medium and long-

term contracts."

Kristy further outlined the challenge of householders' behaviour, and them using the bin that simply means their food waste is taken away more quickly, and the challenge faced in her local authority where in-vessel composting is still a preferred treatment option for food waste. As Chris Murphy summed up, the challenge is to sell the idea, financially, to local authorities; and to communicate the idea to the householder – a much harder task!

Asking householders to further separate their food waste and communicating the right message is a big challenge, it was agreed, but as Matt Hindle said, one of the most powerful things that WRAP can do with the Action Plan is also to help educate and inform local authorities. But of course, for the finances to stack up for the local authority, you need the buy in of the householders – good food waste capture leads to a more efficient collection service... which in turn leads our discussion to communications...

It was agreed there is much to be done on communication with householders. Anita explained that Biogen, for one, does host public visits and how children, especially, leave with an enthusiasm for recycling food waste. "Educating the public does have an impact," she said, but it's not a quick win. For WRAP, and Linda, there are three key drivers for successful engagement with householders: information and communication on good waste; the provision of caddy liners; and clear reminders in the form of stickers on bins – what can and can't be collected. But as Matt added, it's also about collaboration between local authorities and AD operators, and getting the right message to householders is just as important for the operator so it can operate profitably. ➔

It was suggested that this is still very much the “start of the journey” on food waste, and if we look back 10 years, dry recycling was in much the same place. Food waste is still relatively new for households to understand – what it is and why it is important – and as Kristy added, it’s important that householders start to understand the AD process too and what their food waste can actually be used for.

Paul offered an interesting local authority viewpoint, talking about the psychology of the process. He explained that local authorities need the householders to create the supply, and so they need to support them in doing that through the provision of liners and education, for example, which becomes a committed long-term investment. “Committing to these costs means there is a risk, and councils are risk averse, given it’s public money, so a lack of support for food waste collections becomes somewhat understandable,” he explained, showing that it’s not simply a case of the local authority blindly supporting food waste collections, as much as it may want to, or its residents might want it to!

## Under Pressure?

CHRIS ASKED if operators are facing pressure as they can’t invest without a guarantee of supply, and does commercial food waste offer greater benefits? “The Government make it sound as though there is up to 10m tonnes of food waste just waiting for us to collect, but it’s simply not, and we’re dealing with as much as we can... but we need help,” explained Kristy, and on the issue of commercial waste, she added that she would much rather a delivery of supermarket food waste than household food waste because, “as they are so risk averse, you know exactly what you’ll get from them – a lorry-load of out of date pizzas will be exactly that,” whereas household food waste, even with the best intentions of the householders, is much more easily contaminated, “but we have to deal with that regardless,” she added. “I’d RATHER deal with commercial food waste, but we NEED it from the households.”

So how do we get to this collaborative approach? For Paul, it is about generating a better understanding of the green economy and households showing the same passion as has been seen for the steel or



Linda, Paul, Matt and Anita give full concentration to Kristy, out of shot

automotive industries, when they have suffered. “I’d love for householders to be banging on our door asking for a separate food waste collection!” he said, while Matt Hindle added that collaboration and co-ordination from government on the green economy was vital. “We need it to believe in the green economy and the importance of food waste recycling; that’s vital at a leadership level,” he added.

But it’s at a local level that the real opportunity seems to lay. While it was suggested that the public are currently somewhat averse to some renewable energy sources, the fact we have gone full circle and are back to producing “local energy” from sources such as AD is a powerful and persuasive message, “and food waste is the best story of the lot for that” as Chris put it. “It is a wonderful story,” agreed Kristy, explaining that one of GWE Biogas’ plants produces almost enough energy to power its nearest town, “but no one knows we are even there!” she added.

It was agreed the “local benefits are a powerful motivation” and Linda said that through WRAP’s Recycle Now work, it has seen that people do want to know where their waste goes and what happens to it, yet not enough seems to be being made of this opportunity. “We’re very good at blowing our own trumpet within the industry on the issue of digestate, for example, but when it comes to sharing the public message, we tend to hide,” it was said, “and we need a positive story in the public eye.”

Is that the fault of the operators, not getting the message out there, or is the local press simply not interested in sharing these stories? A bit of both, it would seem, and Matt suggested that the retailers could also support the cause with messages about the food we buy being grown locally, and with local energy sources. “We haven’t found the issue, as a collective, that people identify with yet,”

added Paul, despite the fact that if you are a customer of one of the big six energy suppliers, then you will be receiving at least some AD-generated energy.

But, as Paul Vanston nicely summed up, there is a complexity of messages out there. “In one sentence we are telling householders ‘don’t waste food’ and also ‘give us your food waste.’” It is, as he says, a complicated message. And while we have focused almost exclusively on recycling of food waste in this discussion, the reduction of food waste could be the subject of another round table in its own right, but in terms of communicating the right message, the panel moved onto the moral argument and the further challenge of convincing the public that food waste going to AD isn’t depriving another person of a meal!

“People are amazed at what they see has been thrown away when they visit an AD plant,” Kristy said, “and wonder why it wasn’t given to those in need of a meal. That’s what, and how, people see it at the moment... that money is being made from the process and food is being taken from the mouths of those who need it.”

Chris brought the discussion back to collections, and the work that has been done on consistency of collections, posing the question that “isn’t there just one way to collect food waste – in a food waste caddy on a weekly basis?” WRAP’s Linda Crichton was unsurprisingly the first to take up the discussion...

She said consistency was being looked at on several levels – consistency of the materials collected; the communication message; and the systems used to collect it. “In terms of food waste we have more consistency than we do for dry materials – either it’s separate and weekly, which our evidence says is the most effective for higher capture, or mixed with garden waste. But the last 18 months has seen a trend away from mixed collections ➡

as local authorities are looking to charge for garden waste collections, which means food waste has to be separate, or either stopped completely.”

Matt added that the Action Plan rightly identifies consistency as a key issue, and that in looking at how we can achieve our recycling goals nationally, and “the provision of consistent food waste collections across the country is the key to unlocking higher recycling rates and better services to households.”



*Linda Crichton gets animated*

“Does consistency equal less contamination?” Chris asked the panel. The consensus is that it SHOULD; consistent systems equals a less confused public equals more and better food recycling. It would certainly make the communications issue an easier one to tackle, if there was just one message nationwide, it was agreed, bringing the debate back round, once again, to communications!

## Clever Contracts

MOVING ON again, as I try to sum up these in-depth discussions as best I can, Chris posed the question of contracts, and if there is room for “more clever contracts” that would show perceived benefits for both parties and encourage more local authorities to get involved? Again, ease of use for the householder is seen as key to this, to make it more attractive for a local authority to get involved... and perhaps more “transparent” contracts or clauses to help incentivise the capture of food waste, building communications requirements or provision of liners into the treatment contract, for example.

As the AD operators pointed out, however, they don’t necessarily want liners, but if that is what is needed to drive food waste recycling, as evidence suggests, it would be about providing the right liners, although as Kristy said, “the supporting of liners probably isn’t where

the AD industry would like to step in,” but the provision of visual reminders, stickers on bins, to give a positive message as to what the bins can accept to help increase capture rate is something that operators would probably find more appealing, it was agreed.

Chris said that he liked that idea of “end use comms”, that AD is an established technology, now being used for household waste, and that it produces gas and energy, with the digestate going



*Anita Smith offers Biogen’s perspective*

to land, but who should be sharing that message? “There’s a great message there, but who should be pointing that out? The food retailers and producers do a lot of work on food waste prevention, but what they’re not saying is that they send what can’t be reused to AD. It would be more powerful to come from Tesco, than from CIWM,” he surmised.

“It needs to be down to the end consumer, rather than within the industry,” Kristy said, citing the vegetable producers who grow for the supermarkets, and who have their own AD plants. “You can’t get more closed loop than that,” she rightly stated, and there are many similar examples, but as much as the supplier shouts about their closed loop credentials, people still prefer to listen to the likes of Waitrose, it was agreed.

The example of a local brewer was highlighted, for which GWE Biogas is growing barley from digestate... the sort of product that a retailer could really communicate a positive message around (I.P.A.D. Matt Hindle suggested as a name for it, a joke for ale drinkers!). But as he then added, “it’s not about communicating a message, it’s messages, to farming and about recycling food

waste and about producing electricity, gas, transport fuel and heat... there’s countless stories to tell, but in some ways that just makes it harder.” Which story do you use and how does it become of national interest?

And Biogen’s Anita Smith reiterated that it delivers many such CSR reports to its retailer customers, showing how many loaves of bread its digestate has helped grow, for example, but that good news never gets beyond their



*Kristy and Paul face questions from the floor*

boardroom. “Local authority food waste has come from the retailer,” she adds, so why not share that message?

Of course, commercial and hospitality food waste accounts for a percentage of the total, and while the focus today has been on household waste, it shouldn’t be overlooked, and it was suggested that small trade food waste would follow the example of households, taking good practice from home to work, so long as the message into homes was right and the communications clear. But like food waste reduction, commercial food waste could also provide the subject for another round table on another day!

So, with the barriers identified, both in the Action Plan and in this discussion, with agreement that collaboration – between operators, local authorities, government and industry – is important, and that we can work together on communications and contracts; and that we should do more to get the message out there and involve others, such as retailers, Chris closed by saying that we [the industry as a whole] looks forward to the official launch of the Action Plan.

Collaboration, communication, consistency and collection – forget the 3Rs, this is the food waste 4Cs. ■

To view the Food Waste Recycling Action Plan, due to be launched on 7 July, visit [www.wrap.org.uk/foodwasterecycling](http://www.wrap.org.uk/foodwasterecycling)

