

Briefing: Waste strategy for England and the construction sector

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1. THE WASTE STRATEGY

*The Waste Strategy for England*¹ launched in May 2007 sets out a vision for sustainable waste management and a framework for future waste policies. Importantly it encourages a shared responsibility from all parts of society to divert waste from landfills. In terms of businesses, it is stated that they have a big part to play in creating economic and environmental gains, by ensuring their operations use recycled materials and include waste reduction measures. The strategy is offering incentives and guidance to do this and it emphasises the importance of resource efficiency, by making products using fewer natural resources and lessening the environmental impact of products throughout their whole life cycle, which leads to more sustainable consumption and production. Waste prevention is a key commitment with an emphasis on decoupling waste growth from economic growth. The impact of waste management on climate change is highlighted, showing that there is considerable scope for reducing greenhouse gas emissions by reducing, reusing and recycling the waste we produce.

2. CONSTRUCTION SECTOR

The waste strategy highlights the construction industry as a priority sector for further action. The construction industry accounts for the largest single source of waste arisings (32%), and was responsible for about one third of England's hazardous waste in 2004. There is much scope for improved resource efficiency with around 420 Mt of materials used every year. The construction sector continues to grow. It employs over 2 million people and is responsible for 8% of gross domestic product (GDP). This presents a challenge for decoupling waste growth.

Priority product groups and waste materials are being targeted for action using criteria such as their waste, volume/growth and environmental impact, and notably their potential for greenhouse gas reductions. Many of these materials are used regularly within the construction sector, for example plastics, paper/card, glass, wood and aluminium, and products such as paints and packaging. To drive forward the improved environmental performance of products a new unit has been set up within the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) (which is also developing roadmaps for key products), looking at the environmental impact of a product throughout its life cycle; again construction products such as windows, plasterboard and toilets are highlighted.

Evidently for resource efficiency to be fully realised within the sector, buy-in from the whole supply chain is essential. The strategy highlights existing commitments (by both the construction industry and the government) to encourage the sector to take action.

- (a) Developers: the code for sustainable homes is subject to consultation and is being made mandatory. It has a requirement for a site waste management plan, and setting of appropriate targets as a minimum standard.
- (b) Manufacturers: the Ashdown agreement, whereby the plasterboard manufacturers, the Gypsum Products Development Association and the government have committed to reducing plasterboard waste to landfill; it is anticipated that other areas of the supply chain will develop their own agreements with a sectoral agreement in place by April 2008.
- (c) Clients/contractors: site waste management plans are likely to be made mandatory in England next year for construction projects over a specific threshold value.
- (d) Waste management industry: providing capital support to overcome the market failure of the perceived risk of investment for certain materials reprocessing.

Other initiatives include delivery of business support for resource efficiency through the Business Resource Efficiency and Waste programme (Brew), and developing a construction resources and waste roadmap to ensure effective implementation of the waste strategy.

3. THE FUTURE

As with any strategy there are a number of targets presented. The overarching target calls on the construction industry to halve the amount of construction, demolition and excavation wastes going to landfills by 2012, by waste reduction, reuse and recycling with a longer term goal of zero waste to landfills by 2020. Targets are also suggested at a client level with the government also taking action (as £3 billion is spent every year on construction and refurbishment of the government estate), with a proposed target to achieve waste-neutral construction in its major construction projects by 2012.

The construction waste targets and commitments were published by the Department for Trade and Industry (DTI), the *Draft Strategy for Sustainable Construction*² provides the opportunity to achieve

a step-change in the sustainability of the procurement, design, construction and operation of built assets proposing a number of short (up until 2010) and medium term (2010–2020) milestones. This strategy is an important vehicle to ensure that government policy on sustainable construction is clearly joined up and provides coherence between all the various policies, regulations, performance standards, guidance documents and voluntary initiatives, including those related to resource efficiency.

4. CONCLUSION

Should the industry embrace resource efficiency?

Resource efficiency provides economic benefits, both in terms of using fewer resources, creating less waste, increasing productivity and better management of resources and waste. Construction companies are starting to position themselves ahead of their

competitors through their sustainability commitments, believing they will gain a clear competitive edge and enhance their reputation; and last but certainly not least there are clear environmental benefits from reducing the sector's carbon emissions and landfilling less waste.

REFERENCES

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2. DEPARTMENT FOR BUSINESS, ENTERPRISE AND REGULATORY REFORM. *Draft Strategy for Sustainable Construction: A consultation paper*. Department for Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform, London, 2007. www.berr.gov.uk/consultations/page40642.html

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