Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs

Final Report of the Waste and Resources Evidence Strategy Reflections Event

August 2007

On 26 June 2007, Defra’s Waste Evidence Branch (WEB) hosted a stakeholder Reflections Event to introduce its draft Waste and Resources Evidence Strategy 2007-2011, and to gain feedback on the overall approach proposed to scoping, procuring, assembling and interpreting the evidence base to inform waste and resource policy. The event sought to obtain stakeholders’ views on emerging research priorities and input for future research projects. The event was attended by some 100 participants, representing a cross-section of stakeholders from across the UK.

Opening session

The event was opened by Professor David C Wilson, Chair of Defra’s Waste and Resources Research Advisory Group (WRRAG) who introduced the day and provided the background to WREP. Daniel Instone, Head of the Waste Strategy Division in Defra, summarised the new Waste Strategy for England 2007 (http://www.defra.gov.uk/environment/waste/strategy/index.htm), focusing in particular on the evidence needed to underpin strategy implementation. Nick Blakey, Head of the Waste Evidence Branch, outlined both the development of the new Waste and Resources Evidence Strategy 2007-2011 and its content. Professor Jan Gronow, chair of the WRRAG sub-group which led development of the new Evidence Strategy, then introduced the breakout sessions. A brief discussion session followed to clarify any points on the Evidence Strategy and the structure of the event.

Break-out sessions

Participants attended two sets of parallel break-out groups to consider key evidence questions taken from our Evidence Strategy. Given the time limitations of the day, only some issues could be covered, so the WEB selected the breakout session topics according to where they felt most in need of input on developing project content in important areas. Each group was given a briefing note for their topic area and discussions were led by an independent facilitator.

Group A1: Sustainable Resource Consumption and Management

The group focused on two topics. The first was 'prioritising products based on carbon impact (life-cycle assessment) for waste management decision’. After brainstorming about ten project ideas, they elaborated working objectives and key participants for a specific project on Research into a useful and credible standard for LCA for resource management decisions. They also explored what a projects covering ‘barriers to prevention, reduction and recovery might entail.
Group A2: Cost & Benefit of Waste Management Interventions

The group focused on Theme A, Understanding Economics and Incentives, of the evidence strategy. They began by brainstorming what evidence they thought already existed, and then chose 3 questions on which to focus. These addressed the implications of landfill tax on business waste streams, the landfill allowance trading scheme - evidence for municipal solid waste, and incentives for recycling household waste. For each topic, the group debated a number of issues, and identified 5 or 6 ‘potential future projects’ that they felt ought to be considered.

Group A3: Key Materials

The focus of this group was on one of the sub-headings within Theme C of the evidence strategy. After discussing issues of definition, the group identified 11 research ideas. The first was a secondary research project mapping the current knowledge base for the management of waste pathways for all 7 of the key materials identified in the Waste Strategy. Other research ideas built on this idea of the interlinks between different key materials and included selecting optimum waste strategy and identifying efficiency thresholds; communication effectiveness; substitution effect; future trends and drivers; understanding industry’s drivers; export trends and resource scarcity; making the business case; quality control and micro-contaminants; technology; and implications of oil price changes.

Group A4: Resource Flow

The group focused on one of the sub-headings within Theme F of the evidence strategy, and in particular on how best to develop a framework model. They debated the issues and highlighted a number of problems and limitations, before outlining the requirements for such a model. They proposed two parallel studies, one addressing model functionality and the other data issues.

Group P1: Stimulating Investment in Waste Collection and Treatment

The group chose to focus on 3 questions within Theme D of the evidence strategy. A discussion of facility needs led to a proposal for a project on how carbon and societal impacts affect the policy for new technologies. Discussion of the quality of recycling and securing markets for outputs from treatment facilities (e.g. compost, and compost-like outputs from MBT plants) led to proposals for (i) research on public and local authority perceptions and (ii) long-term trials for land application.

Group P2: Producer responsibility

From the 4 questions under this heading in Theme C of the evidence strategy, the group chose to focus on production design incentives. Brainstorming identified 4 key areas of research for producer responsibility (PR) influencing product design: (i) where in the chain and on which products is it most effective to place PR? (ii) which
products have the most end of life impact? (iii) how to make the business case for PR? and (iv) how much evidence is needed to make the case? These ideas were then worked up into an outline specification for a research project on using PR to incentivise product design for waste prevention (as well as for ease of recycling).

Group P3: Risk Assessment/ Exposure Assessment

The group discussed the suggestion that most risks from waste management facilities are actually amenity issues. The problems are how to measure the impact of a waste facility on amenity; how to improve risk communication with the public; issues concerning risk and exposure assessment (e.g. how to deal with episodic releases); epidemiological studies; and the need to improve the regulatory system for inert wastes.

Group P4: The Third (Community) Sector

The group discussed three questions under this heading in Theme E of the evidence strategy. Brainstorming took place around the need to raise awareness (e.g. it was noted that there are wide social benefits which ought to be quantified); further measures needed to facilitate third sector access to local authority waste work; and how to promote change/ uptake / engagement in the third sector. Further research was proposed to identify barriers in using the third sector (e.g. procurement procedures in LAs, knowing about what is on offer and what can be done), specifically documenting examples of good practice.

Final Plenary Session

The final plenary session was a panel discussion chaired by Professor Sir Howard Dalton, Defra’s Chief Scientific Advisor, who began with a presentation that placed the Waste and Resources Evidence Strategy in the context of Defra’s wider strategic approach to evidence and innovation. He kicked off the discussion by asking to what extent the waste and resources evidence programme needs to engage in both primary and secondary research? Stakeholders discussed the need to balance both types of research: secondary research requires both rigorous peer review and the joint interpretation of the research results by evidence providers and policy makers and primary research is equally important to ensure we are prepared for future policy challenges. There was also a challenge to involve the waste industry actively in waste and resources research.

A second question from the chair addressed the role that horizon scanning and futures work might have in the Evidence Strategy. Discussion included the value of a ‘scenario’ approach; an appeal that WREP’s clear policy focus should not preclude some ‘blue sky’ research; the importance of behaviour change; and the need to ensure that the evidence strategy remains flexible enough to deal with emerging issues (particularly those with implications for public health).
The session concluded with a discussion as to how waste prevention fits within the Evidence Strategy. While not explicitly addressed in the core themes of the strategy, it is recognised as key and cuts across most of the themes. Additionally, WREP currently includes several projects addressing waste prevention, and these will be built on in implementing the new Evidence Strategy.

After the Reflections Event

Participants at the Reflections Event were invited to submit in writing any further thoughts, both on the draft Evidence Strategy and its implementation. A handful of further contributions were received, most amplifying break-out session outputs and proposing project ideas. Some related to the Evidence Strategy itself, and some of these, along with comments during the day, have been taken on board in the final version. For example, we have strengthened the wording in Table 4.1 to reflect the important role of waste prevention in ultimately achieving many sustainable waste and resource policy goals. We have also included new sections of text in the strategy to discuss how stakeholders were, and will continue to be, involved in informing and delivering the evidence base.

Conclusion

The Reflections Event was an important input to the development of the Evidence Strategy and the next phase of the Waste and Resources Evidence Programme. Strong research trends and priorities did emerge throughout the day which in some cases confirmed views already expressed in the strategy, for example the need for a holistic, life-cycle approach to waste research, but also raised less transparent issues, such as the need to identify technological and innovation opportunities that can help bridge the gap between today’s policy drivers and tomorrow’s environmental challenges. The Waste and Resources Evidence Strategy 2007-2011 sets out a broad framework for providing the evidence base for future waste and resource policy development in line with the Waste Strategy for England 2007.