BEST VALUE
LEARNING from INSPECTION

WASTE MANAGEMENT

The Strategic Challenge
The Audit Commission promotes the best use of public money by ensuring the proper stewardship of public finances and by helping those responsible for public services to achieve economy, efficiency and effectiveness.

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The public expects high-quality waste services, and local surveys show that residents see refuse collection as the most important service provided by local government.

- in 1999/2000 in England and Wales, more than 29 million tonnes of municipal waste was produced at an overall cost for collection and disposal of around £1.5 billion
- the major challenge is to maintain user satisfaction and control costs while at the same time reducing the need for waste disposal – the top priority being waste reduction, then re-use and recovery/recycling, with the least desirable option being disposal

There have now been over 100 best value inspections of waste-related services.

- these provide important learning for local authorities, the Government and the Audit Commission in taking best value forward

Key messages are emerging from these inspections.

- many local authorities are finding it difficult to meet the Government’s recycling targets; those that are succeeding are taking hard decisions about how to improve their traditional services
- recycling waste is only part of the story; efforts to reduce the amount of waste generated are equally, if not more, important
- authorities have to meet short-term statutory targets while recognising the need to develop and deliver longer-term, sustainable waste management policies
- closer partnership working between waste collection and waste disposal authorities, and with other key stakeholders including the private sector, is the key to delivering both statutory targets and sustainable waste management

The Audit Commission recommends a range of actions for local government to take...

- adopting kerbside collection of recyclables to increase recycling rates, and exploring the potential for reducing costs, such as alternate weekly collections
- developing ways to reduce the whole waste stream – for example, home composting
- making long-term commitments to better waste disposal facilities (energy from waste, landfill sites, composters or reclamation plants)
- increasing public awareness about the need for long-term sustainability decisions that might be unpopular in the short-term
- developing joint initiatives with other authorities, and with the private and voluntary sectors to minimise waste and increase recycling rates

...and for central government.

- developing markets for recycled materials, as a matter of urgency, by accelerating the work of the ‘Waste and Resources Action Programme’
- exploring possible incentives to encourage the reinvestment of recycling credits and Landfill Tax credits in improving waste services, including recycling and disposal initiatives
- accelerating strategies for reducing waste, such as packaging, before it reaches households, and increasing efforts to educate the public about the urgent need to minimise waste
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- reviewing the compatibility of the targets for recycling and reducing collection costs to the lowest quartile
- considering whether the current framework for determining planning applications is appropriate for long-term environmentally sensitive decisions
- simplify the statutory planning framework for waste management

Evidence from inspection shows that local government can rise to the major challenges in waste management, but that the majority of authorities still have much to do. They can learn from those authorities already achieving or exceeding best value targets. Central government must also take action to create the context in which local government can deliver.
INTRODUCTION

This paper is the first in a new series from the Audit Commission based on the lessons emerging from best value inspection, together with Audit Commission research on good practice, and analysis of performance information. It looks at the strategic issues affecting the waste management service and is intended for a national audience of stakeholders including central and local government, professional bodies and other interested organisations.

The best value regime has been in place for more than a year and about 20 per cent of authorities have been inspected on aspects of waste management in the first year. This ‘strategic challenge’ paper highlights local authority progress and challenges both local and central government on waste issues. Concern about the environment continues to move up the national and international agenda, and waste management is a core activity in the development of alternative approaches.

The Audit Commission’s work has identified a wide range of operational good practice that local government has adopted. The Commission will shortly publish a companion paper setting out this good practice material, which will be aimed particularly at service managers.

Waste management is a good choice for the first Learning from Inspection product because it illustrates well the general best value dilemmas:

- how to raise average performance towards the current best;
- how to connect local people with public services and to engage them in their modernisation;
- how to explore the potential of partnerships with the private sector in delivering services; and
- how to link everyday services to complex long-term issues such as sustainable development and, in particular, to balance the trade-off between cost and public satisfaction.

WHY WASTE MANAGEMENT IS AN IMPORTANT POLICY ISSUE

Waste management is one of the most visible front-line services that local government provides. Unlike other services that have a specific client group, such as elderly people or parents with school-aged children, services such as refuse collection and recycling impact on almost everyone on a weekly, if not daily, basis. In 1999/2000 in England and Wales, more than 29 million tonnes of municipal waste was produced – almost one tonne per household per year on average – at an overall cost (for collection and disposal) of around £1.5 billion.

1 Municipal waste is waste that is collected by, or on behalf of, local authorities. For 1999/2000 this comprised 26.25 million tonnes of household waste and 3.09 million tonnes from non-household sources.
Opinion surveys suggest that residents think refuse collection is the most important service provided by local government. Many users have a high regard for their waste services, and some councils consistently achieve high satisfaction ratings and good performance against published performance indicators. Poor waste services can lead to residents seeing their area as rundown and dirty, and unattractive to potential businesses and other employers.

But a ‘good’ service is not simply one that has high immediate satisfaction scores or that succeeds at the traditional task of collecting refuse. Wider environmental concerns take local authority waste management responsibilities much further. Indeed, sustainable development underpins central government’s approach to waste management. And the range of targets in the Government’s Waste Strategy 2000 and those of the EC Landfill Directive emphasise the importance of effective waste management.1

The Government expects authorities to take full account of all activities related to waste (EXHIBIT 1). The challenge for local authorities is, as far as practicable, to address user needs and concerns while reducing the need for waste disposal: the top priority is waste reduction, then re-use and recovery/recycling, with the least acceptable option being disposal to landfill.

EXHIBIT 1 Waste management in local authorities

Waste management covers all activities related to municipal waste.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Waste management strategy</th>
<th>Waste disposal</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Street cleansing</td>
<td>Landfill</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Litter/fly-tipping</td>
<td>Energy from waste</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graffiti</td>
<td>Civic Amenity Sites, etc</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abandoned vehicles, etc</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Waste collection</td>
<td>Recycling</td>
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<tr>
<td>Household/trade waste</td>
<td>Composting</td>
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<td>Bulky items, etc</td>
<td>Bring sites</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Kerbside collections</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Material Reclamation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Facilities, etc</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Audit Commission

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III All district and unitary councils (London boroughs, metropolitan councils and non-metropolitan unitaries) are responsible for waste collection. Waste disposal is a function of county and unitary authorities (except those covered by the six statutory waste disposal authorities).
Inspection Judgements

Evidence from inspection shows that local government can rise to the major challenges in waste management, but that the majority of authorities still have much to do to deliver continuous improvement in waste services.

Best value became a statutory duty on 1 April 2000, and the first tranche of inspections started in the late summer of 2000. By early summer 2001, over 100 inspections of waste services had been completed. Those that have been published show that, according to the inspectors’ judgements, the majority of authorities provide only a ‘fair’ service and most are unlikely to improve (EXHIBIT 2). But a number of authorities such as Brent, Oldham, Knowsley and West Devon were judged by inspectors to be ‘good’ and likely to improve further, and all the inspections have provided important learning for both local authorities and the Audit Commission.

An analysis of inspection evidence has confirmed that these four authorities are addressing the key issues that are critical to the delivery of effective waste management services:

- progress on meeting the Government’s recycling targets;
- finding ways to reduce the amount of waste generated;
- recognising the need for long-term decisions about waste; and
- effective partnership working both inside and outside local government.

“...A number of authorities...were judged by inspectors to be good and likely to improve further.”

Exhibit 2 Inspectors’ judgements of waste services

Inspectors report that the majority of authorities at present provide only a ‘fair’ service.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Poor</th>
<th>Fair</th>
<th>Likely to Improve?</th>
<th>Good</th>
<th>Excellent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>YES</td>
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<tr>
<td>Probably</td>
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<td>Unlikely</td>
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<td>No</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Note: This chart includes judgements from some inspection reports that are awaiting publication. Source: Best Value Inspection Service
THE KEY ISSUES

Local authorities are having to reconcile what are real dilemmas – meeting the expectations of residents, while reducing costs to the lower quartile and meeting central government targets (for example on recycling). Waste Strategy 2000 outlines the Government’s expectations for an increase in the recovery of value from municipal waste (BOX A).

BOX A Targets and goals for household waste

“Waste Strategy 2000 the Government has set a series of targets and goals to ensure the necessary step change in waste management delivers the Government’s vision and the requirements of the EC Landfill Directive. Key targets and goals are:

• to meet our existing targets of 40 per cent of municipal waste to be recovered and 25 per cent of household waste to be recycled or composted as soon as possible. The Government aims to achieve this by 2005.
• to recover value from 45 per cent of municipal waste by 2010, including recycling or composting 30 per cent of household waste by the same date.
• to recover two-thirds of our municipal waste by 2015, at least half of which should be through recycling and composting.”


Best value expects continuous improvements to services that are linked to user views and needs. But for waste services, the trade-offs between environmental concerns and cost are also critical. The best performing authorities have made the compromises required to balance public opinion and the achievement of key waste targets. Others still have to address these dilemmas:

1 Many local authorities are finding it difficult to meet the Government’s recycling targets; those that are succeeding are taking hard decisions about how to improve their traditional services.

Analysis of Audit Commission Performance Indicators for 1999/2000 show that, while ten authorities were already performing well above the overall national target1 of 25 per cent for recycling by 2005, most were below 10 per cent. And in comparison with a number of other western European countries the United Kingdom’s performance is poor. Many local authorities have yet to come to terms with the implications of central government’s expectations for recycling on their current services and need to make radical changes to recycling schemes in order to achieve the targets.

2 Recycling waste is only part of the story; efforts to reduce the amount of waste generated are equally, if not more, important.

Waste is forecast to increase by as much as 30 per cent over the next 10 years. The amount of waste produced per household is very different across the country, but overall there is a prediction of continued growth. Few authorities inspected have developed waste minimisation strategies that embrace the whole community; yet without concerted effort to reduce the amount of waste produced, many authorities are unlikely to meet disposal and recycling targets.

1 In March 2001 DETR produced, for England, guidance on the Municipal Waste Management Strategy, which included recycling and composting standards for individual local authorities for 2003/04 and 2005/06.
Authors have to meet short-term statutory targets while recognising the need to develop and deliver longer-term, sustainable waste management policies.

Waste management is a long-term business requiring strategic planning, challenging decisions and significant investment. And there is a wider consensus that these issues will impact on the whole community and therefore all have a role to play in developing robust and effective solutions. But it can be difficult for relatively short-term local government political administrations to take the long-term and difficult decisions needed. Members will need to balance the short-term local and national imperatives, and the longer-term decisions that are needed to plan for and invest in waste management infrastructure.

Closer partnership working between waste collection and waste disposal authorities, and with other key stakeholders including the private sector, is the key to delivering both statutory targets and sustainable waste management.

The waste stream has to be considered in its entirety. Local authorities will need, therefore, to explore the potential benefits of greater partnership working with other authorities, and with the voluntary and private sectors. They have to be prepared to embrace new ways of working, including long-term partnerships, outcome-based contracting and developing local waste consortia. If these partnerships fail to emerge, central government may consider imposing even stronger direction.

In each of these four areas, inspections show that some local authorities have achieved real improvement. Details of their experiences and actions are included in the Audit Commission’s companion publication. The following sections expand on the challenges facing both central and local government.
EXHIBIT 3 Recycling rates (all authorities, 1999/2000)
The majority of authorities recycled less than 10 per cent of their waste in 1999/2000.

Note: Does not include county councils and joint waste disposal authorities.
Source: Audit Commission Performance Indicators, 1999/2000

The recycling and composting performance standards set by DETR show that, taking performance from the 1998/99 baseline, most authorities will have to double their recycling rate by 2003/04 (EXHIBIT 4).

EXHIBIT 4 The Government’s recycling and composting performance standards
Many authorities will need to increase their recycling rates significantly to meet the standards for 2003/04.

While there is a debate in local government about how realistic these targets are, the House of Commons Environment Select Committee considers them to be not demanding enough.\(^1\) Inspection evidence shows that the current targets could be met – this has been proven by the performance of some councils – but many need to take urgent and radical action to change the way that they deliver their recycling schemes. Authorities will need to consider a range of service options to increase their recycling rates, including kerbside collection of recyclables and green waste, and better use of recycling facilities at civic amenity sites. Further examples of actions taken by authorities to increase their recycling rates are set out in the companion publication on good practice.

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\(^1\) House of Commons Select Committee on Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs, Fifth Report, March 2001.
Councils are often reluctant to disrupt traditionally popular methods and patterns of service for waste collection – for example, switching to alternate weekly collection of recyclables and non-recyclables. But improvements to the environment are so important that councils need to convince local people to support appropriate changes. Central government expectations, which involve challenging traditionally popular service provision, need to be made clearer and then addressed as a priority at the local level.

Central government, meanwhile, will need to address the effectiveness of recycling and Landfill Tax credits, as in some authorities they have been diverted away from waste services and used for other local priorities. The Government will also need to stimulate further the markets for recycled materials. Efforts to increase the amount of recycling will be counterproductive if over-supply results in a fall in the market price. Even now some local authorities have difficulties in selling their recycled materials.

“CENTRAL GOVERNMENT, MEANWHILE, WILL NEED TO ADDRESS THE EFFECTIVENESS OF RECYCLING AND LANDFILL TAX CREDITS.”

At the end of 2000, the Government set up the Waste and Resources Action Programme (WRAP), an independent body intended to remove barriers to waste minimisation, re-use and recycling, and to promote stable and efficient markets for recycled materials and products. WRAP also has an advisory, support and guidance role, including assistance to local authorities struggling to find markets for their recyclables.

**ACTIONS REQUIRED**

**LOCAL GOVERNMENT SHOULD:**
- give priority to meeting the statutory recycling targets, building on the experiences of those authorities that have already achieved or exceeded them;
- adopt kerbside collection of recyclables to increase recycling rates, and explore the potential for reducing costs, such as alternate weekly collections;
- engage with local people about recycling, and explain how achieving the targets will impact upon traditional services, such as weekly refuse collections; and
- ensure that more residents have access to a range of recycling facilities, including provision at civic amenity sites.

**CENTRAL GOVERNMENT SHOULD:**
- develop markets for recycled materials, as a matter of urgency, by accelerating the work of the ‘Waste and Resources Action Programme’; and
- explore possible incentives to encourage the reinvestment of recycling credits and Landfill Tax credits in improvements to waste services, including recycling and disposal initiatives.
2. WASTE MINIMISATION

Waste minimisation is a comparatively neglected area, but one that has to be addressed in tandem with recycling. Minimising waste should have at least equal status, as the amount of waste is growing faster than the rise in the recycling rate, and is forecast to increase by as much as 30 per cent over the next ten years. Since 1993/94, most authorities have increased the proportion of waste recycled by between 2 and 8 per cent, but the volume of waste has grown by 18 per cent. Between 1997 and 1999, recycling per 1,000 households grew by 20 tonnes per year, but the amount of waste collected by authorities grew by 81 tonnes – in just two years, a net growth of 61 tonnes per 1,000 households requiring disposal.

However the amount of waste generated per household is very different across the country (EXHIBIT 5). The variations between councils are more significant than the differences in recycling rate; with some local authority areas generating three times as much waste per household as others. There are a number of factors which may influence this such as the demographic profile, and urban/rural differences, but without increased public awareness local authorities are unlikely to achieve significant improvements in waste reduction.

EXHIBIT 5 Household waste collected (tonnes per household, 1999/2000)

Some authorities collected three times as much waste as others.

"...WITHOUT INCREASED PUBLIC AWARENESS, LOCAL AUTHORITIES ARE UNLIKELY TO ACHIEVE SIGNIFICANT IMPROVEMENTS IN WASTE REDUCTION."

Note: This chart does not include waste collected at civic amenity sites by county councils. On average only 0.13 tonnes of waste per household is disposed of in this way.

Source: Audit Commission Performance Indicators, 1999/2000
The problem needs to be addressed by educating and involving the whole community, encouraging home composting\(^1\) of green waste, and increasing enforcement action where necessary. Further examples of actions taken by authorities to encourage waste minimisation are included in the companion publication on good practice. Action at the local level needs to be supported by central government action to raise public awareness and ensure a consistent and proactive approach by other public agencies (for example, the Environment Agency’s role in enforcement action against fly-tipping). There are other aspects of waste minimisation where central government will continue to have a leading role, such as reducing the amount of packaging waste.

\(^1\) Home composting is not reflected in the BVPI – ‘percentage of household waste arisings composted’.

### ACTIONS REQUIRED

**LOCAL GOVERNMENT SHOULD:**
- collect information on the type and amount of waste generated within the local area, to inform future policy and provide practical pointers to waste reduction;
- develop approaches to reducing the whole waste stream – for example, home composting; and
- adopt a more proactive approach to enforcement – for example, reduce trade waste entering the household stream via fly-tipping and abuse of civic amenity sites.

**CENTRAL GOVERNMENT SHOULD:**
- increase efforts to inform and educate the public about the urgent need to minimise waste;
- accelerate strategies for reducing waste, such as packaging, before it reaches households; and
- address the local inconsistencies in the Environment Agency’s current performance on enforcement action against fly-tipping.
3. LONG AND SHORT-TERM TRADE OFFS

Authorities have to meet short-term statutory targets while recognising the need to develop and deliver longer-term, sustainable waste management policies.

Waste management is a long-term business requiring strategic planning, challenging decisions and, often, significant investment. It can be difficult for relatively short-term political administrations to take these long-term and potentially unpopular decisions, such as changing traditional collection methods (as discussed in the earlier section on recycling).

Local authorities must make long-term commitments to better waste disposal facilities (energy from waste plants, landfill sites, composters or reclamation plants). Often these require highly sensitive planning decisions and can arouse strong local feelings and action. But this issue is now pressing, and the responsibility cannot simply be passed on for future generations to address. Central government should ensure that the current planning framework allows speedier decisions as well as a robust airing of all views.

Service managers and members also face the dilemma of balancing improvements in recycling rates to meet statutory targets and the potential increase in costs, against local pressures to keep down council tax and fund other service priorities. Although analysis of Audit Commission Performance Indicators for 1999/2000 shows no clear relationship between the cost per tonne for refuse collection and the proportion of waste recycled, a few authorities are approaching or meeting their individual standards and the overall 2005 target, while reducing costs to the lower quartile (EXHIBIT 6). The analysis raises the question as to whether meeting recycling targets hampers the achievement of the lower quartile refuse collection costs. This merits further consideration by central government. Meeting both objectives – increased recycling and the lower quartile cost targets – will be a demanding challenge.

EXHIBIT 6 The cost of refuse collection and recycling (all authorities, 1999/2000)

The variation in recycling rate does not explain the variation in cost.

Refuse collection costs may be influenced by a number of factors including urban/rural differences, collection methods, etc.
Tackling these issues will require a more co-ordinated approach to service planning. Authorities are required to produce a number of statutory plans relating to waste services, but inspection evidence indicates a lack of co-ordination in producing these plans, resulting in incompatible service policy decisions. An individual waste collection authority is required to prepare a recycling plan, while the development of Local Agenda 21 has also set out clear expectations for the long-term sustainability of local authority waste services. Waste management is also subject to the national planning framework and the requirement to have a Waste Local Plan or Part II to the Unitary Development Plan. Additionally, the national waste strategy supports the development of community plans, and municipal waste management strategies, while best value also requires authorities to produce a best value performance plan. These separate plans, sometimes produced in isolation by different authorities, need to be brought together.

**ACTIONS REQUIRED**

**LOCAL GOVERNMENT SHOULD:**
- increase public awareness about the need for long-term sustainability decisions that might be unpopular in the short-term;
- make long-term commitments to better waste disposal facilities (energy from waste, landfill sites, composters or reclamation plants);
- demonstrate how it intends to address the achievement of prescribed recycling standards while reducing the cost of collection to that of the lower quartile; and
- integrate often fragmented local plans for waste services to identify the changes needed to achieve sustainable waste management.

**CENTRAL GOVERNMENT SHOULD:**
- review the compatibility of the targets for recycling and reducing collection costs to the lowest quartile;
- consider whether the current framework for determining planning applications is appropriate for long-term environmentally sensitive decisions; and
- simplify the statutory planning framework for waste management, linking together land-use planning, provision planning, community planning and performance planning. This should link together the currently disparate local plans, recycling plans, municipal waste management strategies, best value performance plans and Local Agenda 21.
4. PARTNERSHIPS TO TACKLE THE WHOLE WASTE STREAM

The only way to manage waste is to tackle the whole waste stream (how waste is generated, how it is collected, how it is recycled and how it is disposed of). Inspection findings show that there are two challenges that only a minority of authorities have addressed effectively. First, all authorities in local areas should work together with greater urgency and open-mindedness. This applies particularly to authorities in two-tier structures (county waste disposal authorities and district waste collection authorities, and joint waste disposal authorities) and to unitary authorities where cross boundary working is a practical option. Effective partnership working will require strong leadership, agreed objectives and clear monitoring and reporting on progress.

Second, waste management requires a more challenging view of procurement, recognising the need for economies of scale, integration of services, long-term investment and outcome-based contracts. Currently, too much best value effort is fragmented, with individual authorities working alone to their own priorities, with only a partial view of the waste stream and tackling procurement in an outmoded way. Local authorities need to be more proactive, with better co-ordination and active joint working when developing future best value reviews. An approach to procurement for waste services that explores the potential for partnerships with the private and voluntary sectors is also an imperative.1

Actions Required

LOCAL GOVERNMENT SHOULD:

- develop long-term plans in partnership with other councils (for example, between counties and districts or neighbouring unitary authorities) and ensure that the development of plans is informed by best private sector practice;
- co-ordinate best value reviews and contracting timetables with a view to active joint working;
- develop joint initiatives with other authorities and with the private and voluntary sectors to minimise waste and increase recycling rates; and
- for longer contracts, build in regular agreed reviews, consultations with users and stakeholders and flexibility to accommodate technological and organisational change.

CENTRAL GOVERNMENT SHOULD:

- identify ways to overcome the fragmented responsibilities, strategies, targets and best value responsibilities across councils, especially in two-tier areas. Central government needs to address this if national targets are to be met.

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1 The Best Value Waste Network involving DETR, LGA, IDeA, the Institute of Wastes Management, the Environment Services Association and the CBI is intended to encourage local authorities of all types and size to work together and with the private and voluntary sectors to deliver a comprehensive integrated waste management service.
CONCLUSION

Waste management is a service that is acquiring an increasingly high national profile because of its implications for sustainable development and environmental improvement, and demanding new statutory requirements and targets.

Much remains to be done to meet these targets. Local authorities will need to challenge (to make the hard decisions to change current provision), to compare (to see how the best perform), to consult (to engage local people in the improvement of services) and to compete (to pull in investment, to reduce costs and to increase management capacity). Authorities will use these ‘4Cs’ to best effect in reviews that look at the whole of waste management, in partnership with other authorities, and in dialogue with the private sector about future delivery of services. Inspectors will also be looking to see that authorities’ best value reviews and action plans address the waste management issue as a whole.

Improvements should be possible over the first five years of the best value review cycle, and inspectors will be looking to highlight improving performance in future inspections. The key messages in this paper should help to bring about that improvement, together with the support provided by the more detailed material in the companion publication.

Central government also has an important role to play in promoting greater public awareness, improving incentives to local government, developing the markets for recycled materials and accelerating action to reduce packaging. Central government should also be reviewing the compatibility of the targets for recycling and reducing costs, rationalising the range of separate plans that local authorities have to produce, and identifying ways to overcome the fragmented responsibilities across councils, especially in two-tier areas.

For its part, the Audit Commission will increase the challenge to authorities in its inspections of waste management – on the basis that the challenges are being met by the best-performing councils. In particular, inspectors will review performance indicators that relate to recycling, cost of collection and waste generated, and examine whether authorities have made intelligent use of this information.

“IMPROVEMENTS SHOULD BE POSSIBLE OVER THE FIRST FIVE YEARS...”