

# **CUMBRIA SCRUTINY NETWORK**

## **WASTE MANAGEMENT WORKING GROUP**

Report on the Cumbria Strategic Waste  
Partnership

January 2006

## 1. Introduction

The perceived need for a joint, countywide piece of scrutiny work looking at the Cumbria Strategic Waste Partnership (CSWP) stemmed from two main factors. Firstly, the serious concerns expressed by the Audit Commission about the rate and nature of progress on strategic waste matters in Cumbria<sup>1</sup>. Although the Audit Commission report acknowledges some improvement has taken place, it concludes that “there is a lack of tangible progress”<sup>2</sup> and highlights a number of areas of continuing concern.

The report also notes the financial implications of Cumbria failing to meet its targets for reducing landfill. Based on current policies, these penalties are projected to be:

- £500,000 in 2005/6 (based on exceeding landfill allocation by 3000 tonnes):
- £3.4 million in 2006/7
- £10 million in 2008/9

Clearly, the potential for penalties on this scale is a matter of concern for all the local authorities in Cumbria.

The second main reason for joint scrutiny is that, as partnership working develops across the local authorities, the work inevitably risks becoming less accountable to the Members of the various authorities. Scrutiny carried out jointly by Members from all Cumbrian local authorities should effectively mirror the work of the CSWP itself and will help ensure accountability.

The scrutiny members serving on the group held an evidence session on 30<sup>th</sup> November at which they questioned representatives from the Audit Commission and the Cumbria Strategic Waste Partnership. We thank both organisations for taking the time to assist us with our work. This report is based primarily upon that session. As such, we recognise that it is effectively based upon a single snapshot of the partnership. Nevertheless, we had significant concerns and considered these best expressed in a short report.

The report is being sent to the CSWP and to each of the relevant scrutiny panels within Cumbria. We ask each scrutiny panel to pass the key recommendations to the relevant decision-making body in their council for consideration.

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<sup>1</sup> Waste Management Follow-Up: Cumbrian Local Authorities, Audit 2005/2006, September 2005

<sup>2</sup> p18

## 2. Cumbria Strategic Waste Partnership

The Cumbria Strategic Waste Partnership (CSWP) comprises representatives from all the councils in Cumbria. Other organisations are also represented, including the Government Office North West, the Environment Agency and the North West Waste Forum. There exist officer and Member groups within the partnership. The CSWP is charged with bringing together all the councils in Cumbria to tackle waste issues in a co-ordinated way. The need to reduce landfill is perhaps the driving force for the work of the partnership.

### 2.1 *The Partnership*

It is clear to us that there are some very committed and able people working for the CSWP. However, the commitment to the partnership appears to be patchy across the county, with some district councils contributing little and playing no meaningful role in the discussions of the partnership. During our questioning, we were struck by the apparent lack of cohesion in the partnership. Further, it was not clear to us who was consistently providing the necessary leadership within the partnership. We were also left with the impression that the partnership did not 'own' its own problems and was unwilling or unable to find answers to the problems faced. Given that the CSWP is charged with developing the strategic approach to waste in Cumbria, we found this situation extremely disappointing.

Whilst it is clear that some district councils are insufficiently committed to the work of the partnership, it is also the case that the County Council needs to place itself more forcefully at the centre of the partnership. As the Waste Disposal Authority, the County Council must provide a core for the CSWP and take the lead in building and developing the partnership. With large potential fines under the Landfill Allowance Trading Scheme (LATS) system, the apparent absence of strategic leadership within the partnership cannot be allowed to continue.

**We are not convinced that the partnership is currently fit for purpose. Although some members of the CSWP are clearly committed to pursuing the work of the partnership, the contribution from the authorities around the County is uneven and inconsistent. The remedy must consist both of greater leadership at the centre of the partnership and a committed contribution from all members of the partnership. We urge each local authority to reconsider what contribution is required from it to ensure the success of the partnership.**

### 2.2 *Waste Strategy*

We are particularly concerned that the full waste strategy will not be in place until after the strategic partner is appointed. The reasoning given by the CSWP was that it would be inappropriate to develop a strategy without

guidance from the strategic partner. We believe there to be two key problems with this approach. Firstly, the waste strategy should be a policy document that defines the direction of waste policy for the future. As such, this document should be one which is owned politically and practically by the local authorities of Cumbria. Secondly, there is a strategic vacuum at present. The framework document<sup>3</sup> does not define the short-medium term strategic approach with sufficient robustness or detail and so it cannot be ensured that the waste work which is going on around the County is consistent with future plans. The Audit Commission emphasised that one of the key needs in the waste work in Cumbria was an “integrated” approach from the authorities. Without a full waste strategy to work to, we do not see how this can occur.

**We believe that the overall direction of waste work in the county is inadequately defined. If the partnership is to oversee a move towards a truly integrated approach to waste management, there must be a more detailed strategic plan with targets, timetables and clear responsibilities. We believe that it should be a top priority of the partnership to develop a strategy as quickly as possible.**

### *2.3 Public Face and Accountability*

In preparing for the evidence session, we were somewhat concerned by the lack of “public face” of the partnership. As an interested member of the public, it is not easy to gain an understanding of what work the partnership is undertaking or what the main outputs will be. We understand, however, that steps are being taken to address this through the development of a Communications Strategy. We look forward to a situation in which both the work and workings of the partnership are more transparent to the public.

The accountability of the CSWP also causes us some concern. It is clear from the Audit Commission report and our own experience, that the work of the partnership is not always well communicated to Members of the councils around the county. This is particularly critical. Without a comprehensive network of supportive and engaged elected Members around the County, the partnership may find stony ground for its more difficult messages and actions.

**The CSWP must address the information flows about its work. At present, relatively little information is fed back to elected Members around the County. Indeed, this was one of the reasons for this scrutiny group being set up. Further, with no waste strategy and no annual report produced, the accountability of the partnership is very limited. This issue will become more important still if the partnership finds ways of becoming more autonomous in its work.**

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<sup>3</sup> The framework document defines the planned work of the partnership. It can be found at <http://www.cumbria.gov.uk/CouncilMeetings/Content/Public/2941/38398101255.pdf>

## 2.4 Resources

If the partnership is to provide a truly integrated countywide approach to waste management, then it must be adequately resourced. It seems likely that the absence of a strong 'core' to the partnership is partly a result of the small team that exists within the County Council. Indeed, we think that the partnership may need to look to shifting to more dedicated support, jointly funded by the partners. For example, a dedicated communications officer could help drive rapid implementation of the communications strategy. **We urge Cumbria County Council and all the District Councils of Cumbria to make waste a priority and look to fund and staff the work of the partnership adequately. Further, the CSWP should examine the potential for employing dedicated staff to enable more rapid progress with the partnership's work.**

## 2.5 Decision Making

We heard that the process of decision-making within the partnership is a cumbersome one. In short, the Members involved in the partnership can only take a decision in principle, which each Member must then take back to their authority and seek approval for. As the partnership looks to mature and take more decisions, this seems to be a process fraught with difficulties. Again, the desire for an 'integrated' approach is likely to be stymied.

**Although we appreciate that it may prove difficult, we urge the partnership to examine mechanisms to make the partnership more autonomous. Ideally, only the most important, strategic decisions should need to be ratified by the individual authorities.**

## 2.6 Pace of Progress

Waste management in the individual councils in Cumbria was the subject of Audit Commission inspections in 2004. The Audit Commission carried out a re-inspection with a report published in September 2005. Although it is acknowledged that some changes had been made by the partnership between the inspections, the report concluded that there had been a "lack of tangible progress" by the CSWP since the earlier inspection.

We have already made recommendations about commitment to the partnership. The partnership told us that the "building blocks were now in place" to deliver the change of pace required. From the other answers given at the evidence session, we remain to be convinced. **It is difficult to overstate the practical, financial and political threats that waste management poses. The partnership must take ownership of Cumbria's waste problem and provide the drive and leadership necessary to secure the change of pace required.**

## 2.7 Minimisation Focus

Cumbria is now the county that produces the most waste per head in England. We are worried that the focus to date has been almost exclusively upon recycling. The lack of emphasis upon the more desirable options of 'reduce' and 're-use' must be addressed. **The partnership must start pursuing waste minimisation measures and messages throughout the County.**

## 3. Conclusions

From the evidence session, our initial impressions of the CSWP were entirely in line with the conclusions of the Audit Commission. Further, we were not reassured that the partnership was starting to implement the recommendations made by the Audit Commission. We hope that our report will help to underline the need to implement those recommendations.

It is the joint responsibility of all the local authorities in Cumbria to tackle the problems of waste in the county. With potential fines of £10 million in a few years time, this responsibility is a pressing one and should be a priority for all Cumbrian councils. From an initial evidence session and background research, we conclude that the partnership is not yet providing the necessary impetus or co-ordination that is essential for that process. We have made a number of recommendations upon the partnership and its individual members intended to address this.

### Members of the Scrutiny Waste Management Working Group

|                                 |                                |
|---------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| Allerdale Borough Council       | Cllr Jeff Gardner              |
| Barrow Borough Council          | Cllr Mrs Jean Waiting          |
| Carlisle City Council           | Cllr Trevor Allison            |
| Copeland Borough Council        | Cllr Mrs Anne Bradshaw (Chair) |
| Cumbria County Council          | Cllr Cam Ross                  |
| Eden District Council           | Cllr Mrs Mary Herbert          |
| South Lakeland District Council | Cllr Mrs Gill Cranwell         |

## **Summary of Recommendations**

### **The Partnership**

**We are not convinced that the partnership is currently fit for purpose. Although some members of the CSWP are clearly committed to pursuing the work of the partnership, the contribution from the authorities around the County is uneven and inconsistent. The remedy must consist both of greater leadership at the centre of the partnership and a committed contribution from all members of the partnership. We urge each local authority to reconsider what contribution is required from it to ensure the success of the partnership.**

### **Waste Strategy**

**We believe that the overall direction of waste work in the county is inadequately defined. If the partnership is to oversee a move towards a truly integrated approach to waste management, there must be a more detailed strategic plan with targets, timetables and clear responsibilities. We believe that it should be a top priority of the partnership to develop a strategy as quickly as possible.**

### **Public Face and Accountability**

**The CSWP must address the information flows about its work. At present, relatively little information is fed back to elected Members around the County. Indeed, this was one of the reasons for this scrutiny group being set up. Further, with no waste strategy and no annual report produced, the accountability of the partnership is very limited. This issue will become more important still if the partnership finds ways of becoming more autonomous in its work.**

### **Resources**

**We urge Cumbria County Council and all the District Councils of Cumbria to make waste a priority and look to fund and staff the work of the partnership adequately. Further, the CSWP should examine the potential for employing dedicated staff to enable more rapid progress with the partnership's work.**

### **Decision Making**

**Although we appreciate that it may prove difficult, we urge the partnership to examine mechanisms to make the partnership**

**more autonomous. Ideally, only the most important, strategic decisions should need to be ratified by the individual authorities.**

#### **Pace of Progress**

**It is difficult to overstate the practical, financial and political threats that waste management poses. The partnership must take ownership of Cumbria's waste problem and provide the drive and leadership necessary to secure the change of pace required.**

#### **Minimisation Focus**

**The partnership must start pursuing waste minimisation measures and messages throughout the County.**