

## **Some things government can do to facilitate an efficient approach to energy from waste are simpler than others**

**Matthew Rhodes, March 2020**

### **Blog Post for the Energy Research Accelerator, Waste-to-Energy and Circular Economy Commission**

Like many approaches to the provision of energy (particularly low carbon ones) cost-effective delivery of energy from waste projects requires a collaborative, strategic approach to infrastructure planning and investment. The Policy Commission report highlights this by calling for Resource Recovery Centres, co-locating waste, energy and economic activities in locations which are also well-served by appropriate transport infrastructure.

Such outcomes can only be delivered efficiently with public consent and with those who are responsible for strategic planning of transport, waste, economic and energy infrastructure working closely together. Sadly, in the UK such collaborative working aligned with public consent is very difficult to achieve, and often so expensive that it prejudices outcomes in favour of the larger schemes. Only large schemes with very high capital costs justify the significant project development, management and communications costs entailed by the challenge of bringing together multiple parties working at different scales and accountable to different Whitehall departments.

It need not be this way. Government could very simply cut the costs of project development and accelerate the transition to a low carbon energy system, supported by circular economy outcomes, by strengthening the role of local and regional government in some aspects of infrastructure planning and delivery; and above all by aligning the boundaries of strategic regional planning authorities for transport, economic development, waste and energy (and ensuring all these are democratically-accountable locally) so that initiatives such as Resource Recovery Centres can be taken forward without gratuitous organisational and political barriers getting in the way.

The National Infrastructure Commission began to recognise this issue in its report of October 2019<sup>1</sup>, specifically recommending a stronger role for metro mayors and devolved governments in infrastructure planning and regulation, but such strengthening is only part of the story. The historical weakness of English local government (in particular) is already reflected in a horrible diversity of overlapping structures across the country – for example, some areas have metro mayors and others do not; each metro mayor has different powers; outside the metropolitan areas some councils are unitary and coincide with strategic economic planning bodies such as local enterprise partnerships (LEPs) and some do not. To make matters worse, spatial planning is probably done by a body with a different geographical scope to transport planning and waste planning (for example in Birmingham) and to cap it all, energy planning and regulation is solely managed at national level.

People also matter – a lot – in democracies, so local democracy and planning boundaries need to be aligned to the places to which people relate – if we want local democracy to work effectively. We need to be very careful of artificial places which make sense to a relatively small number of Whitehall planners but mean little to people who live there. The ‘Midlands’ is a very good example of this. With the exception of a very short period in the eighth century, when Offa of Mercia ruled from Wales to Kent and was the dominant force in a country broadly split between the North (Northumbria) South West (Wessex) and Midlands (Mercia), the Midlands has never been a viable or

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.nic.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/NIC-Strategic-Investment-Public-Confidence-October-2019.pdf>

recognised political entity within the UK. Indeed, not long after Offa the coming of Vikings and the subsequent cultural and political division of the country into areas governed by Danelaw and Saxon law respectively drew a cultural, legal and linguistic line across the heart of the country which can still be seen in place names and local dialects today – very roughly following the line of the M1 and (perhaps not so coincidentally) the boundaries between the East and West Midlands.

Such historical observations can be overblown – but equally ignoring them entirely is unlikely to be particularly helpful, at least not without clear benefits and strategies for overcoming the challenges created. Such local distinctiveness can also be used constructively and creatively by skilled politicians and planners, for example in building support for renewable energy technologies particularly suited to local conditions and interests.

Economic geographies also matter in both local planning and local democracy. Largely agricultural areas such as Lincolnshire not only have a completely different set of infrastructure needs from large industrial and urban geographies such as the West Midlands; they also quite understandably have completely different political priorities and pre-occupations.

So for me probably the simplest thing government could do to facilitate a more efficient approach to energy from waste nationally is to complete and tidy up the local government re-organisation which has stuttered along for much of the last 10-20 years: ensuring every part of the UK is covered by a mayoral combined authority following sensible and recognisable political boundaries (established by sensible reference to local people and their histories, combined with some practical considerations around minimum viable economic geographies<sup>2</sup>). These mayoral combined authorities should have statutory powers over all aspects of local infrastructure planning and regulation so they can both secure public support for the kind of energy from waste schemes proposed in our Commission report, and deliver these schemes efficiently.

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<sup>2</sup> Individual cities – with the possible exception of London in the UK – are too small and political boundaries don't reflect economic and employment catchments, for example.