



CLEAN-UP TIME

In Wales we produce more hazardous waste per head of population than any other region of the UK.

Its safe disposal is a topic that doesn't normally get the exposure it deserves and the public at large are happy to conclude that it is someone else's responsibility to dispose of it.

At one time, waste management in Wales, appeared to be a simple matter to deal with. "We simply collected all the waste we produced, identified an isolated spot and buried it under a relatively thin layer of soil," said Robert Little, commercial director of the MSS Group.

"Out of sight and out of mind was the philosophy, but unfortunately it is a legacy we cannot so readily forget. Our one-time dependence on landfill as a means of low-cost waste disposal has left us with a heritage of pollution hot spots that will need careful management for decades to come."

There is also, Mr Little believes, another equally dangerous and far more insidious by-product of our disposable society, and that is a failure to address the root causes of our current predicament.

He explained: "We seem unwilling to acknowledge that a viable and long-term solution means significant changes to our attitude and behaviour towards waste."

"On top of this we will need to sanction major investment in plant and infrastructure at a time when the public purse is under pressure in a variety of ways."

When hazardous is placed in front of waste

SOMEBODY HAS TO DEAL WITH HAZARDOUS WASTE, SAYS ROBERT LITTLE, COMMERCIAL DIRECTOR OF THE MSS GROUP

the odds of having a sensible debate about how we manage it reduce dramatically.

The rules as they relate to hazardous waste changed in 2004 when the EU Landfill Regulations (2002) came into force. In essence, after July 2004 it became illegal to co-dispose of hazardous waste and normal waste in a landfill site.

Mr Little said: "As a consequence of the regulations, the landfilling of hazardous waste in Wales fell from 230,000 tonnes in 2004 to 3,000 tonnes in 2006, as operators of hazardous waste landfills stopped operating or chose to accept only inert or non-hazardous waste."

He added: "At a superficial level this sounds good, but the hazardous waste is still being produced and has to go somewhere."

The big question is where?

That which is disposed of legally is transported to England for disposal, with the associated increases in transport costs, increased road traffic and air pollution and the added risk of incidents occurring during transport, with all that entails for the environment.



"Sadly we also have concerns that a sizeable proportion of this waste ends up on the side of our highways, in a farmer's field or buried in a landfill site that has no environmental safeguards associated with it," Mr Little pointed out.

"We could and should have done more to prevent this happening."

The Assembly Government has been aware, since 1999, that the implementation of the EU regulations would have wide-ranging implications across several key sectors in Wales.

But many experts believe it has failed to engage in a debate about how best to deal with the changes.

They believe that as a result we now have no landfill facilities or new technology solutions in Wales for the safe disposal of hazardous waste generated by the commercial sector.

Often the public resistance to new facilities is based on a shortage of objective information and a lack of trust, argues Mr

Little. The private sector needs the confidence of a robust and predictable planning framework in order to invest the millions of pounds required to deliver these innovative new facilities.

"I don't believe it is credible to claim that this is a commercial matter for waste producers and the waste industry," said Mr Little. "I believe that this devolution of responsibility simply won't do. The waste in Wales is produced through our economic activities, through our construction projects, through industry and through the healthcare sector."

"We have seen the cost of disposal rise fivefold over the last three years and clearly this cost has to be passed on to our customers. It seems invidious to me that businesses should face higher costs and greater inconvenience by basing themselves in Wales. Surely the goal should be to make Wales an attractive place for businesses to create jobs and wealth in the community."

The solution, said Mr Little, lies in firm and decisive action being taken by our political leaders.

"The Welsh Assembly and local government in Wales need to engage openly in a debate about hazardous waste," he said.

"There is a pressing need to understand the issue clearly and develop a plan to solve the issues we face."

"Our politicians should have the confidence to support the need for modern environmentally-secure and friendly facilities." ■