

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

The below letter was sent to the New Statesman on 17th January 2023

(An open letter) 17th January 2023

Dear Sirs,

I write on behalf of members of the Environmental Services Association (ESA) in response to the article published in the New Statesman on 16/01/23 by Nick Ferris entitled: ***Nothing green about soaring waste incineration, says former Defra chief scientist.***

While we welcome scrutiny and debate about waste policy in the United Kingdom, we feel that the article presents a rather one-sided and subsequently misleading picture of the important role played by energy recovery from waste infrastructure in the UK without offering a viewpoint from the industry or policy-makers responsible for this infrastructure.

As such, I offer the following observations on behalf of our members.

Recovering energy from waste not only contributes reliable baseload power to the UK's energy mix but is a vital part of the UK's sanitation infrastructure, replacing landfill as the primary means of treating societal waste left over after recycling.

In accordance with the *Waste Hierarchy*, the long-standing policy framework which prioritises avoidance, re-use, recycling and energy recovery in order over landfill (the option of last resort), our members have invested billions across a spectrum of new infrastructure that has helped increase recycling and decrease the volume of waste material sent to landfill – enabling the United Kingdom to improve from single-figure recycling performance in the nineties to the 45% average municipal recycling rate today.

The growth of incineration and recycling in recent years corresponds with a decline in waste volumes to landfill. EfW is now the “end of the pipe” and only comes after residents and businesses have separated materials for recycling, so it does not directly and actively draw these recyclable materials into the process.

Our members have long supported their local authority partners in helping residents to recycle all they can, but fundamental reforms to recycling and waste policy are now needed to reinvigorate national recycling performance – ensuring as much material as possible is re-used or recycled and does not end up in energy recovery or landfill.

Defra's ***Resources and Waste Strategy*** has been in development since 2018 and contains important reform of the producer responsibility regime for packaging, as well as an overhaul of collection services and the introduction of deposit return schemes. These measures, if implemented correctly, should make recycling easier and clearer for consumers and make packaging producers responsible for the full net costs of dealing with the packaging they place on the market once discarded. An update from Defra on the progress of these reforms is expected imminently.

On carbon emissions from Energy-from-waste, treating the waste left over after recycling (known as “residual waste”) through energy recovery typically saves 200kg of CO₂e per tonne compared with landfill. Organic waste rots in landfill and produces the potent greenhouse gas methane, as well as other

undesirable by-products, while fossil-based materials, like plastics, hold the potential to degrade into micro-plastics and other substances in landfill, which can leach to the environment without very careful long-term management.

In 2021, the ESA published a **Net-Zero strategy** for the sector, setting out a pathway to achieve net-zero emissions by 2040. Energy from waste will continue to play a necessary sanitation role beyond this period, but we can reduce carbon emissions from these plants in future by reducing the proportion of fossil-based plastics in residual waste; by improving the efficiency of plants; by installing district heat networks and, wherever viable, by installing carbon capture, utilisation and storage (CCUS).

We very much support the ambition of Defra's Resources and Waste Strategy and believe it will help to increase recycling and limit packaging waste sent to energy recovery, but it is now overdue and the sector needs the policy clarity it will provide so that we can begin the next round of investment in the UK's circular economy.

Yours faithfully,

Jacob Hayler

Executive Director of the Environmental Services Association (ESA)