



**Green Party**  
for the common good

**A BURNING PROBLEM**

**HOW INCINERATION**

**IS STOPPING RECYCLING**



### GREEN PARTY BARONESS JENNY JONES

There is every chance that some of the plastics, cardboard and paper that people took care to separate for recycling, will end up being burnt alongside everything that was thrown in the waste bin. None of us wants to see our carefully separated recycling burnt and our elected councillors must stop this from happening.

I find it shocking that the UK is on the verge of burning more waste than it recycles. There are already three English regions where that happens already and on current trends it will be a national problem within a couple of years. The ban on recycled waste going to China has inevitably lead to a UK pile up and that could bring forward the moment when our recycling gets treated as a fuel, rather than a valuable resource.

There is a logic to generating energy from the waste that we cannot recycle, or reuse, but it is meant to be the last resort option. What we have created instead is a market driven system of incinerators which constantly need to be fed. Many councils have signed up to long term contracts with incinerators and my research shows that these have some of the worst recycling rates in the country. In fact, many of these councils have gone backwards and recycle proportionately less than they did six years ago. Let me be clear that it is not the case that people in central London, or Birmingham, or Portsmouth are bad people who are unwilling to recycle, it is because their council is

bad at recycling and has let them and their environment down.

As restrictions have been placed on sending rubbish to landfill, our waste has been diverted into these newly built incinerators, rather than increasing levels of recycling. In the last few years, recycling rates in England have almost flat-lined at just over 11m tonnes, while incineration has grown from 5.5m tonnes in 2012/13 to over 10m in 2016/17.

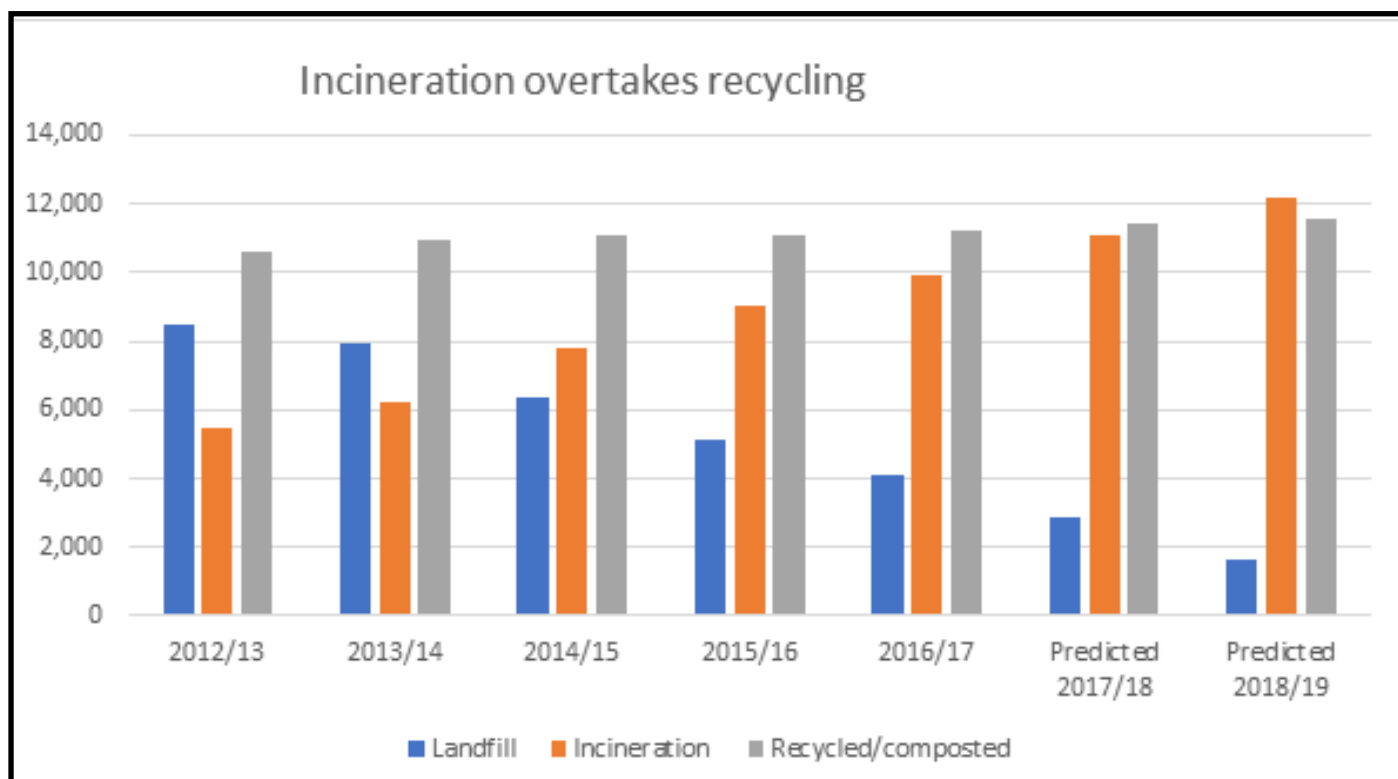
Burning waste is bad for climate change and there are fears over the health impacts of incinerators because of the weaknesses of their air pollution monitoring systems. However, it is the sheer waste of burning a valuable resource which annoys me most. Incinerators are the ash producing products of our make, break and throw away culture. I personally try my best to refuse and reuse, but when I do recycle, I want the reassurance that my efforts to do so will not be betrayed by someone shoving it all into a furnace.

Our use of materials must be a closed loop, where everything possible gets reused. Nature doesn't waste anything and neither should we. Companies and consumers need a steer and a nudge from the government, but I think there is now public recognition that we value our planet and the wealth of its wildlife more than we enjoy the convenience of a plastic lined, disposable coffee cup.





# WE WILL SOON BE BURNING MORE THAN WE RECYCLE



On current trends, England will burn more than it recycles by the end of the next financial year 2018/19. See graph 1.

Three regions already burn more than we recycle: London; West Midlands and North East.

Incineration is a very limited, short-term solution to a long-term problem. It is an old fashioned solution, which blocks modern innovation. As Government advisor, Professor Ian Boyd, [said](#) recently, when appearing before the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee in Parliament:

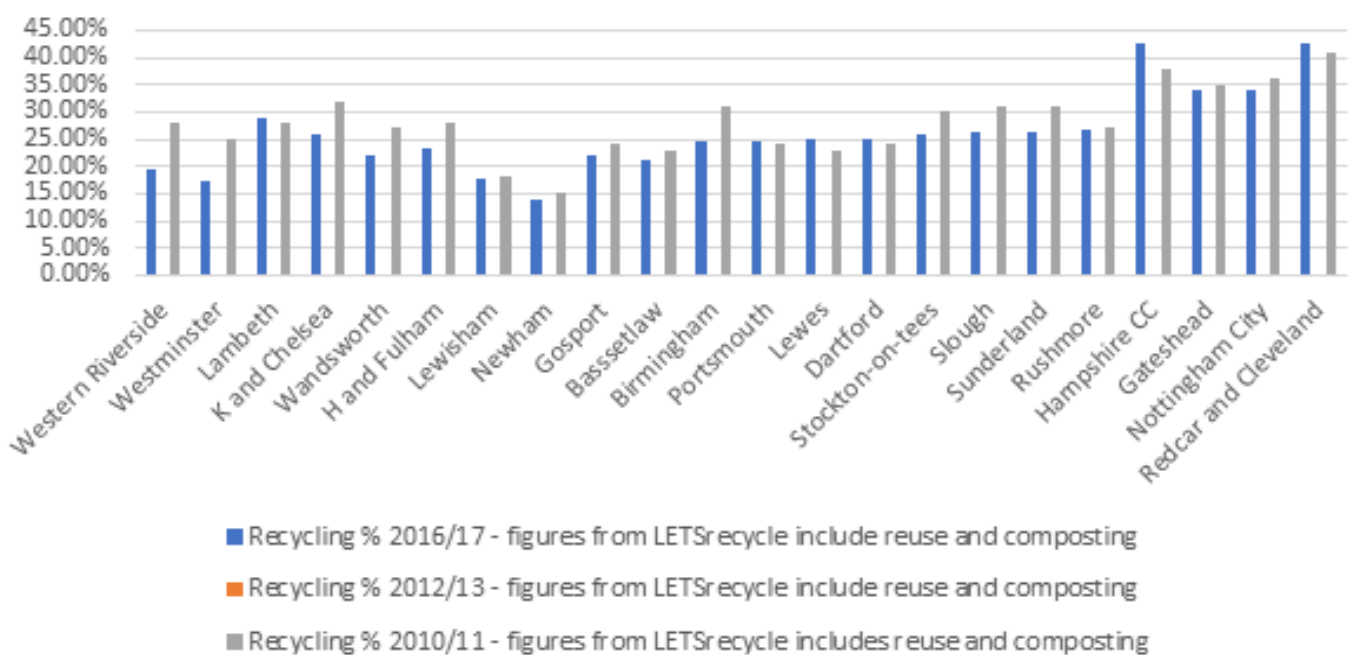
“...one of the things that worries me is that we are taking these materials, we’re putting them in incinerators, we’re losing them forever, and actually we’re creating carbon dioxide out of them as well, which is not a great thing, when in fact we could be long-term storing them until we have the innovative technologies to re-use them and to turn them into something that is more positively valued.”

“I think incineration is not a good direction to go in. I think that if you are investing many tens of millions, hundreds of millions, in urban waste incineration plants – and those plants are going to have a 30 to 40 year lifespan – you have to have the waste streams to keep them supplied. Now that is the market pull on waste, so it encourages the production of waste, it encourages the production of residual waste, it encourages people to think that we can throw what could be potentially valuable materials if we were to think about them innovatively into a furnace and burn them.”



# COUNCIL RECYCLING IS AT A STANDSTILL AND SOMETIMES GOING BACKWARDS

Recycling at a standstill 2011-17







# INCINERATION IS MAKING COUNCILS BAD AT RECYCLING

There are lots of positive ways that local authorities can provide more facilities to make it easier for people to recycle. Some give rewards for recycling, but only **10% of councils** would consider using their statutory powers to force households to recycle. Some local authorities have more frequent collections for recyclables, combined with less frequent for residual waste. Others simply give out bigger recycling bins and smaller residual waste bins. However, these actions don't guarantee an increase in recycling if a council is hooked on incineration.

Even councils with relatively high recycling rates need the co-operation of their residents to make it better. A study of waste in **South Gloucester** (with a 50% recycling rate) showed that over half of the average black bin bag could be recycled or go to compost. This had actually gone up, after the introduction of a charge for garden waste.

**Kent (2009)** We've known for many years that incineration has a negative impact on recycling. For example, with the Allington incinerator contract, which the **Kent Messenger** reported on in 2008 "...what was initially seen as a cash-saving opportunity has quickly turned into a money pit, as the council is forced to send increasingly valuable recyclable material to the incinerator in order to meet its annual quota". In 2009, Ashford Council **stopped** its green waste collection and sent it all for burning, instead of composting.

**Derby (2015)** In 2014/15, Derby recorded the largest fall in recycling among collection authorities in England – dropping from 42% to 32% in the course of 12 months. Part of this was attributed to the contract specifying a minimum organic content, which meant that the council needed to ensure that kitchen/garden waste was diverted for burning.

This is not an isolated problem. In 2014/15, nearly half the council in England didn't run comprehensive schemes of food waste collection (According to the 2017 Digest of Waste and Resource Statistics). This has improved a lot since then, but England still hasn't got the 100% coverage of Wales and Northern Ireland.

**Suffolk (2017)** The local newspaper reported that:

"The number of households using brown compost bins has fallen by more than half in the three Suffolk districts that **introduced charges** for their brown bins last year... And nearly half of the waste that had gone into brown bins was put in general waste bins to be taken to the county's incinerator."

**Greater Manchester (2017)** The council **decided** to continue the practice of mixing plastic in with general waste as "The PTT [Pots, Tubs and Trays] are therefore a very important aspect of the calorific value (CV) required to supply the thermal power station at Runcorn"

**Stoke-on-Trent City Council (2010)** Many local authorities are tied into long term contracts which dictate their behaviour and policy choices over many years. For example, **Stoke** was faced with the prospect of a £645,000 'fine' resulting from a failure to meet minimum contracted waste tonnage levels at their local incinerator. This dispute was sorted out, it shows the financial pressures that councillors face if they want to increase the rate of recycling – Stoke had just introduced a kerbside recycling scheme.

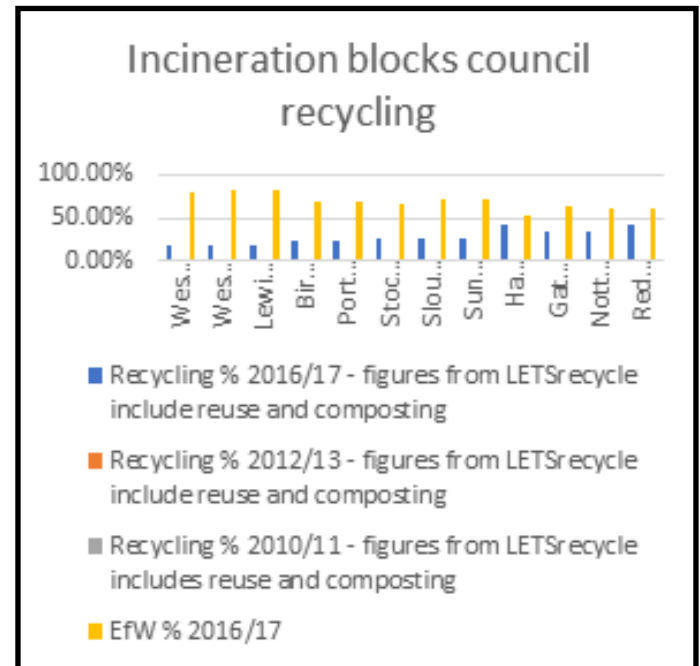
Stoke remains at the lower end of the national recycling league table, as the Assistant Director of Operations **explained** recently "it can cost Stoke-on-Trent up to £100 per tonne to dispose of recycling, whereas it costs around £65 per tonne to incinerate."



## Bad for Essex

Things are about to backwards in **Essex** as well. In Feb 2016 Essex County Council permitted a change in the plans for building a waste processing plant. They reduced the proportion that will be dealt with by the more environmentally benign processes of Anaerobic Digestion and Mechanical Biological Treatments by 70% and increased the incineration to a massive 595,000 tonnes. These plans are being fought by the local community who realise that this represents a massive shift away from recycling and reuse.

In addition, Essex County Council removed the geographic limits on the incinerator such that waste can come in from anywhere. This raised fears that if the council was forced to increase its recycling levels by the government, then it would import waste to burn from continental Europe. The county would then be dealing with The county would then be dealing with traffic pollution from the ports, along with 200,000 tonnes of Bottom and fly ash to dispose of each year.



## INCINERATION IS BAD FOR LONDON



Much of London is bad at recycling, purely because of bad long-term decisions taken by local authorities to sign up to long term contracts to incinerate waste. As the **London Assembly** says “urgent change is needed to stop recyclable and biodegradable material being incinerated.” This failure to make recycling a priority goes across the political spectrum from Conservative Westminster, to Labour Lambeth and Lib Dem controlled Sutton.

London currently incinerates 46 per cent of local authority collected waste, 2 million tonnes of it. From next summer, the Beddington Lane incinerator in Sutton, S.W London, will be burning an additional 300,000 tons per year.





Recycling in west London fell dramatically after several councils – Lambeth, Wandsworth, Hammersmith and Fulham, Kensington and Chelsea – started to use the Belvedere waste incinerator in 2012. The incinerator generates energy but recyclable materials are also being burned.

In Wandsworth, recycling rates have fallen, from 26.7 per cent in 2010 to 21.9 per cent in 2016–2017, since becoming more reliant on incineration. In Kensington and Chelsea, recycling has fallen from 31.9 per cent to 25.7 per cent in the same period.

Many councils don't even do the basics like collecting kitchen waste separately.

“As record levels of household waste are being burned, it's no surprise that London is only managing to recycle an average of 33 per cent. That's a pathetic amount when the Mayor's draft environment strategy says that 70 per cent of our waste is recyclable.”

**Caroline Russell,**  
Green Party member  
of the London Assembly



## THE CHINA BAN AND UK RECYCLING INDUSTRY

In 2015, the UK exported 14m tonnes of waste and scrap for recycling or recovery abroad. Of this, almost 4.5m tonnes was exported to China. That included 74% of waste paper and over half of our recovered plastics. The Chinese ban on taking our recycling could see the tipping point between incineration and recycling reached this year, as material is burnt instead of being processed properly. Industry experts warned Parliament that:

*“...it is increasingly likely that some materials collected for recycling across Europe will end up in landfill or energy from waste facilities.”*

We need to build more of our own infrastructure in order to recycle and deal with our own waste.

Post Brexit we need to come up with new rules that ensure that a certain proportion of material in key products includes recycled materials. This would create a market for the recycled goods and encourage industry to invest.



# INCINERATORS MAKE CLIMATE CHANGE WORSE

The number one challenge facing humanity Incinerators are bad for climate change because they like oil-based plastics which helps raise the temperature of the furnace. For every tonne of waste burned, typically more than one tonne of CO<sub>2</sub> is released into the atmosphere. This means that incineration has a higher carbon intensity than the conventional use of fossil fuels and yet local authorities are signing up to twenty year contracts at a time when we are meant to be reducing our impact on the climate.

Many local residents worry about the potential impact on health of toxic emissions. I accept that modern incinerators are better than those built in the 1970s.

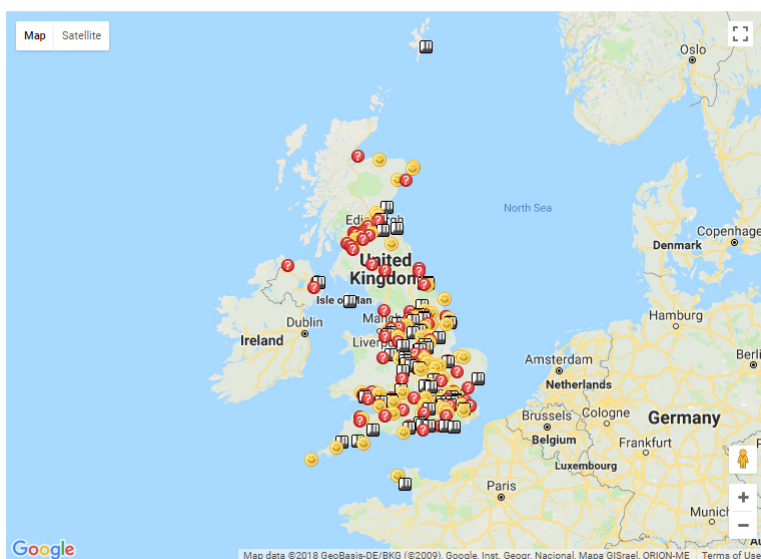
However, there are now many more of them. My experience of working on air pollution over the last two decades has shown me that the official monitoring is not to be trusted and government reassurances are meaningless.

The agencies responsible for minimising the impact on human health must be replaced by truly independent bodies, who use a spot check regime, rather than desktop modelling. My draft Clean Air Bill proposes a Citizens' Commission to assist local people in taking legal action against polluters and if needed, against those responsible for monitoring pollution.

## INCINERATION BOOM

Map of Potential, Existing and Prevented Incinerators

Municipal Waste Incinerators



Including the incinerators already in the **pipeline**, we already have more than enough capacity to burn the residual waste that we can't re-use, or recycle.

A report published in August 2017 (Eunomia, Residual Waste Infrastructure Review: 12th Issue) said:

*“With more facilities still in the construction pipeline, the report forecasts that the UK's supply of treatment capacity will exceed the available quantity of residual waste in 2020/21. Were all facilities to operate at full capacity, together they would limit the UK's recycling rate to no more than 63%.”*

However, there are many more incinerators being planned, supported by lucrative local authority contracts, which will ensure that waste is burnt, rather than put to better use.





For example, as the new Lib Dem sup–ported incinerator in Sutton starts operating this year, neighbouring Croydon Council Tax–payers will now be paying the operators, Viridor, at least £10million per year for the next quarter of a century for the privilege of burning their rubbish.

If the Ministers in Whitehall adopted the approach taken by the Welsh Assembly and brought in a compulsory target for recycling, then local authorities would have to up their game. Wales now recycles 65% of its waste, compared to 45% in England – although some of this is slightly inflated by including incineration waste in the recycling figures because it is used to make concrete.

The Government claim they are still committed to 50% recycling by 2020. However, the reality is that the UK can't achieve this target without directly hitting the finances of the incineration industry.

One perverse consequence of the government's laissez faire approach is we that are building a glut of new incinerators who will struggle to find the raw materials they need. If the UK did increase recycling rates then these incinerators would look abroad for business. We could well find ourselves becoming the dumping ground for Europe's waste, with long queues of hundreds of lorries on the road between the major ports and our incinerators.

## A CIRCULAR ECONOMY

Our government claims to be 'actively en–gaged in agreeing the proposals to sup–port the Circular Economy across the EU'. This is an economy where nothing is 'wasted' and our planet's finite resources are constantly reused and recycled. As United Kingdom Without Incineration Network (UKWIN) puts it:

*"The circular economy is one where materials are neither burned nor buried, where products are designed to be re–used and recycled and repaired, and where nutrients are retained. One needs no 'end of pipe' technology such as incineration because the pipe never ends. The closed–loop circular 'zero waste' economy is better for the environment, the people and the economy. Incineration*

## UNITED KINGDOM WITHOUT INCINERATION NETWORK

"The alternatives to incineration are cheaper, more flexible, quicker to implement and better for the environment. Rather than incinerating waste, local authorities should focus on maximising recycling and providing a weekly separate food waste collection for treatment by composting or anaerobic digestion (AD). Recyclables and biodegradables should be separated from the small amount of residue material. This residue should be stabilised by composting and then sent to landfill."

We need to change the economics to reward good behaviour. Setting a compulsory target for recycling is a good thing, but it won't stop waste being imported in order to be burnt. The government should immediately bring in a moratorium on the building of new incinerators, along with a charge for incineration, the same way they introduced a charge on landfill.

*has no place in the circular economy towards which we should be working, as any material that cannot be re–used, recycled or composted should be designed out."*

We welcome the government moves towards banning non–essential plastic straws and introducing a bottle deposit scheme, but every–day of delay sees more plastic waste accumulating in our oceans. The government's timescale for eliminating avoidable plastic waste is an utterly unambitious 2042. Green councils can help make that happen sooner.

Whatever recycling and reuse targets the Government comes up with they will be meaningless without legal



backing and some mechanism of enforcement. Post Brexit, we need independent environmental agencies in the UK to take over the enforcement role of the European Commission and ensure that the targets are met.

These agencies need to have the power to steer local authorities, industry and government bodies down the road towards a circular economy.

Prof. Ian Boyd, whose work will inform the Government's new strategy, has indicated that an incineration tax and a moratorium on new incinerators were both worth

considering as means to promote recycling alongside investing in innovative recycling processes and 'designing out' waste as part of a holistic approach to resource management.

While policy initiatives like the 25p charge on disposable cups would be brilliant, we also have to deal with the big picture problem of how England handles its waste. Any new government waste strategy that includes incinerators will not deliver a circular economy as they are a block on best practice and innovation.

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTION

- Weekly food waste collection is a basic.
- Ensure your council's waste contract includes recycling of plastic tubs, pots and trays.
- Make the financial details of any incinerator contract public, so that any incentives that discourage recycling, or composting become clear.
- Find out when your council can get out of any existing incineration contract and block any moves to sign a new incineration contract.
- Look at smaller bins for residual waste, or substituting regular recycling collections for other waste.
- Recycling facilities need to be in public spaces, such as shopping areas, around public buildings and on public transport.
- Lobby the government for a tax/charge on incineration, so that recycling infrastructure has a chance to compete and grow.
- Encourage innovation that finds new ways of dealing with problems.



**Green Party**  
for the common good