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These are rapidly changing times for the recycling sector. **Charles Newman** talks to **Elliot Morley**, the new Minister for the Environment, about reducing waste, sustainability incentives and his wormery

When Tony Blair re-shuffled his cabinet in June precious few remarks were made about the new environment minister. As media attention focussed on those leaving government, the former minister for fisheries, well known for his hard work and commitment to the issues, made a short move within the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) to take on a much bigger portfolio. And an even bigger challenge – making Britain greener.

For Elliot Morley some of the issues involved are nothing new, at least on a personal level. Eight years ago he appeared on the cover of the *Waste Watch* magazine, having won the *Waste Watch* Parliamentary Pledge Initiative – a competition challenging MPs to show how sustainable their waste-related behaviour was.

think more and more people are becoming aware about the need to minimise waste, and the recognition that how you live your own life has a huge impact globally, in terms of the waste produced. That's the positive news.

"The negative news is that, since I got that award, overall waste has increased nationally. So while we have growing awareness, we've also growing waste as well. That's a real challenge, well it's more of a top priority of my new brief, to get to grips with the issue of waste management in this country."

Although there's no diminishing the importance of this, it represents only some of the pieces of a bigger puzzle: "My job at DEFRA is to promote sustainability. That means talking to colleagues in planning, in transport and also economic policies ... in terms of

one area we need to catch up. We are probably world leaders on climate and CO₂, we're European leaders on river quality, the state of our coasts and the water quality, but we are behind on waste and I intend to rectify it."

So how does he see this happening? Well, those of you expecting a revolution will probably be disappointed, but few expected that anyway. It seems that the new minister is happy with the course we are already on; his task is to realise the ambitions of the government's existing policy: "We need to sharpen up the structures we have within DEFRA. We've set up the Waste and Resources Action Programme (WRAP) and the Waste Implementation Programme. These structures will focus on a strategic approach in terms of tackling the various areas of waste that we have within this country and engaging with a lot of other groups who are doing a lot of good work around the country.

"I think the strategy [Waste Strategy 2000 and Waste Not, Want Not] is particularly praiseworthy in terms of outlining the kinds of objectives we want to have in government." One development that has been roundly applauded has been reform of the landfill tax, which is something Morley sees as vital both in terms of generating funds and influencing people's behaviour.

Clearly au fait with contemporary economic thought, his vision of structuring markets towards a particular goal has a more positive slant than most: "There are fiscal measures that you can use to bring about a change in people's minds. I think the important thing is to get away from the fact that when people talk about financial

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His prize was a wormery. Surely this wasn't still in use?

"I've still got it," he enthusiastically asserts, "although I could do with some more worms, tiger worms I think..." Leaning back in an armchair of his office suite, he reflects on changing attitudes to waste.

"Well I have a long-standing personal interest in terms of trying to live sustainably and that includes cutting down waste." He appears very relaxed, often speaking with a rum-bustious drawl: "Since I won that award, there's been good news and bad news. The good news is that I

the new role, it takes into account both national and international issues." He's happy to reel off an almost endless list of concerns, seemingly undaunted by the scale of the task, and (perhaps more significantly) with the sense of joined-up thinking increasingly pervasive in today's government ideology: "It's quite a diverse and challenging brief, but it interlinks in all sorts of ways."

Morley is quick to draw attention to concerns about global warming at this point, noting the UK's leading role, but equally swift to flag up the country's shortcomings. "Waste is

for less

instruments in terms of green taxes and environmental measures that they are all punitive. I actually think there needs to be a balance between the role of taxes, such as the landfill tax...and the case for discounts or financial inducements, where people get some financial benefits for what they do."

While continually stressing the primacy of waste minimisation, the new minister is upbeat about the benefits of recycling, re-use and composting. He observes that landfill doesn't actually support that many jobs, while recycling supports lots of jobs. Reflecting on the two million house-

on the central role that councils have to play, noting that, "there are some very good examples, but there's patchy performance between local authorities. We need to get the standards of the worst up to the standards of the best."

Currently, local authorities seeking additional funds to develop their recycling infrastructure have to compete with other councils for a slice of the Waste Minimisation and Recycling Fund. This has not been without its critics, as larger, better resourced local authorities have been able to put together better bids, taking a share of this fund, while smaller councils, or



Elliot Morley

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holds that community recycling groups currently serve, he sounds especially appreciative: "I think they provide an excellent service. They have been separating waste streams for a long time and often they do it in a much more sophisticated way than local authorities, which I should say have often concentrated more on weight rather than the number of waste streams.

"Community groups are also linked with re-use as well, so many of them are integrated in terms of collection re-use and distribution, and are community-based, which is an activity worthy of encouragement and support and I see them as having a very good long-term future."

Opportunistically, I ask if this means there's going to be more government funding for community recycling. Not for the first time, this burly figure shows light-footed political adroitness, suggesting the future for many community groups lies in partnerships with local authorities. He is focused

those with other urgent priorities have missed out – although one of Morley's first acts was to announce a further £24M for 'near miss' local authorities. Regardless, the situation is troubling for beleaguered councils given those looming targets and the rising cost of landfill.

The minister acknowledges this, but notes that at least a challenge fund means the best proposed projects are chosen: "We know where the money is going, it has helped boost our capacities to meet targets. Now the challenge fund is only going to be around for another two years. After that, the money from landfill tax credits is going to be paid to local authorities by the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister ... So local authorities will agree targets with regard to waste reduction and the money will come through revenue support, through DEFRA, but they will have a lot more flexibility in how they use the money. I think we should give local authorities some freedom and auton-

omy, and take them on trust in relation to their commitments to act responsibly and meet the targets."

From his appraisal of the issues, it's apparent that Elliot Morley feels there is a lot to be done. So does he believe that we can eliminate waste altogether? "The hierarchy we've produced makes it very clear you go for minimisation, re-use, recycling and composting before you get to landfill. I think it's very difficult to have zero waste. You are always going to have some residue, but there is no doubt in my mind there is huge scope to get that amount down."

According to the UK's new minister for environment, to make this happen we have to start by changing public attitudes: "Unless you can get people to really value the idea of recycling, then you are not really going to make the progress you want." Considered ahead of his peers eight years ago, it's now time for him to persuade the whole country to think ahead.