



Effective dialogue: Enhanced public engagement as a legitimising tool for municipal waste management decision-making



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ABSTRACT

The complexity of municipal waste management decision-making has increased in recent years, accompanied by growing scrutiny from stakeholders, including local communities. This complexity reflects a socio-technical framing of the risks and social impacts associated with selecting technologies and sites for waste treatment and disposal facilities. Consequently there is growing pressure on local authorities for stakeholders (including communities) to be given an early opportunity to shape local waste policy in order to encourage swift planning, development and acceptance of the technologies needed to meet statutory targets to divert waste from landfill. This paper presents findings from a research project that explored the use of analytical–deliberative processes as a legitimising tool for waste management decision-making. Adopting a mixed methods approach, the study revealed that communicating the practical benefits of more inclusive forms of engagement is proving difficult even though planning and policy delays are hindering development and implementation of waste management infrastructure. Adopting analytical–deliberative processes at a more strategic level will require local authorities and practitioners to demonstrate how expert–citizen deliberations may foster progress in resolving controversial issues, through change in individuals, communities and institutions. The findings suggest that a significant shift in culture will be necessary for local authorities to realise the potential of more inclusive decision processes. This calls for political actors and civic society to collaborate in institutionalising public involvement in both strategic and local planning structures.

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1. Introduction

Waste management has become increasingly complex for public authorities in industrialised countries faced with the challenge of integrating new infrastructure into waste management systems while reducing waste volumes and minimising landfill. Changing established waste management practices in communities, alongside technical developments and environmental protection, may require greater public engagement within the political, institutional and social arenas in which decisions are made.

In Britain, the political context behind such change includes a trend towards regarding waste as a resource and the need to meet progressive statutory targets, largely incorporated from EU legislation, to reduce waste, increase recycling and reuse, and minimise waste residues (Defra, 2007). In practice, national campaigns such as WRAP's *Love Food Hate Waste* have highlighted the potential to

reduce food waste by raising awareness among householders around the economic and environmental benefits of waste reduction. Research into public participation and recycling performance has demonstrated that recycling behaviour can improve, specifically in 'hard to reach communities', through dialogue with householders to assess and respond to their needs, often by offering infrastructure choices for recycling (Williams and Culleton, 2009; Timlett and Williams, 2008). A recent waste policy review highlighted the Government's intention to work more closely with business sectors, including waste management companies, and promised greater emphasis on waste prevention and reuse within an overall context of resource efficiency (Defra, 2011).

A key challenge for many local authorities, and the focus of this paper, is the integration of waste management technologies to treat residual waste (i.e. after recycling and composting) or recover energy from waste (Tunesi, 2010). The precise number and nature of residual waste management facilities required locally will depend on decisions concerning the type of technology to be adopted and its scale (Defra, 2005a). If alternative technologies to landfill are to be integrated successfully in the development of

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waste strategies and facility plans, local authorities will need to address the social dimension in their problem-solving and decision-making processes in order to gain the necessary public support. This is liable to require higher levels of citizen involvement not only to reflect the concerns and interests of local communities, but to extend the knowledge base used for decision-making.

Involving the public at different stages in policy development, using participatory and deliberative methods, is gaining momentum including the use of novel criteria weighting tools for involving citizens in the ranking of municipal solid waste facilities (De Feo and De Gisi, 2010) and the use of participatory approaches that define 'publicly acceptable' lifecycle assessment (LCA) assumptions and sources of data for assessing site-specific aspects and the local impacts of waste facilities (Blengini et al., 2012). These innovative engagement strategies are addressing the fear, emotion and social stigma attached to waste with the aim of transforming attitudes and practice. The Localism Act 2011 reaffirmed the Government's commitment to public engagement, giving communities a greater role in decision-making. Local authorities are now required to adopt more robust forms of engagement whereby stakeholder views, including those of local communities, are explicitly used in waste strategies and facility plans (House of Commons, 2010; SITA, 2010). Best practice guidance on public engagement suggests that stakeholders with a direct interest in the outcome of policy decisions, including the wider local community, should be given an opportunity to shape policy (Defra, 2005b, 2005c; ODPM, 2004) where there is still a chance to talk about alternatives, potential sites and community benefits, and an opportunity exists to establish on-going communicative partnerships between public representatives, technical experts and local community groups (Cotton, 2013).

The support for public engagement through legislation, politics and voluntary initiatives has led to a new mode of dialogue that alters traditional hierarchies of knowledge, thereby enabling scientists and society to play a central role in policy deliberations (Piecicka and Escobar, 2013), and this is changing the nature of political decision-making over the governance of controversial technological developments (Chilvers and Burgess, 2008). Dialogue as a mode of public engagement is gaining momentum in the UK's environmental planning arena, often associated with the need to achieve "lower costs, fewer delays and less uncertainty in the planning process" (DTI, 2007: 259), while internationally it has been associated with the ability to produce "more technically competent and defensible decisions that reduce the risks for government" (Robinson and Nolan-Itu, 2002: 5).

In the UK, innovative initiatives such as community advisory committees have led to collective agreement on new waste management services and facilities in Hampshire. Recommendations were arrived at by using consensus-based decision rules that encouraged participants to debate and challenge conflicting evidence or perspectives to find common ground (Petts, 2006). More broadly, citizens' juries have been used to consider various questions related to health policy and provision and other local planning issues (Petts, 2006; Aldred and Jacobs, 2000). For instance, the creation of a citizen jury, a random selection of citizens mandated to evaluate a given set of policy options, has led to more collaborative appraisal of microbial water pollution from farming and livestock management practice in Devon (Fish et al., 2013). However, despite such efforts to bring dialogue into the mainstream, most deliberative activities reported in the literature have tended to focus on understanding public perceptions and attitudes to more controversial science (e.g. stem cells and synthetic biology) rather than policy-making processes (Piecicka and Escobar, 2013).

Research on public engagement with information on renewable energy developments suggests that it is common for planning officials to exclude community groups on the basis that they are not

sufficiently acquainted with the planning process or incapable of processing information and raising "factually accurate" concerns of a planning nature (Parks and Theobald, 2011: 55). In waste management, some local authorities struggle to engage the public over complex and potentially contentious decisions related to the selection and installation of waste management technologies due to markedly different risk perceptions of these technologies (Hacking and Flynn, 2013). Research on public understanding of the environmental effects from energy from waste (EfW) incinerators, for example, suggests problems are encountered where applications include complex science, particularly modelling dispersions of pollutants and predicting their effects on health (Maynard and Smethurst, 2009).

Public engagement in the application of policy currently lacks a clear rationale and methodological plan for identifying and incorporating citizen perspectives early in the decision-making process (Cotton and Devine-Wright, 2012). This is largely associated with a legal and regulatory framework for public engagement that is often vague on the role of the public, its influence on decision-making (Cotton, 2013) and lack appropriate mechanisms for incorporating public concerns into policy-making (Piecicka and Escobar, 2013).

This paper presents the findings of a research study that explored attitudes towards active forms of public engagement as a means of legitimising waste management decisions. In the context of the developments in public policy described above, an approach that has gained growing support, the analytical-deliberative process is outlined in the following section. The problem-structuring technique underlying the study, based on soft systems methodology, and the research methods used will then be described. Finally, the findings from the study are presented, organised around the key components of an analytical-deliberative process, and conclusions drawn.

2. The analytical-deliberative process as a decision-making tool

Political decision-making based on dialogue and communicative partnerships has attracted growing interest in areas such as waste on the grounds that such an approach will motivate public engagement, broaden the basis of knowledge and values that underpin decisions, produce new possibilities for conflict resolution by taking account of the local context, realise common interests, and increase the acceptance and legitimacy of decisions (Bull et al., 2010; Dialogue by Design, 2008; Environment Council, 2007a,b; Consulting, 2007; Joss and Bellucci, 2002; Petts, 2008).

The analytical-deliberative process, defined here as an iterative communication process that integrates public values and technical analysis of options in decision-making, has proven successful in assessing options for patients on the NHS's kidney transplant organ donation list (Burgess et al., 2007), siting waste facilities in Germany (Schneider and Renn, 1999) and creating water regulations in the US (Stern and Fineberg, 1996). Its main purpose has been to provide a forum for 'non-expert citizens' to complement technical details on environmental risks and costs with public values, in order for relevant authorities to draw conclusions and make recommendations for decision-making (Alberson et al., 2003; Beierle, 1999).

Analytical-deliberation thus creates opportunities to develop and refine practical policy options by integrating technical analysis with relevant knowledge and values through deliberation and synthesis in a process that brings together technical and scientific experts, policy officials, other stakeholders and the general public in order to debate the best course of action. In the practical application of analytical-deliberative approaches each element has a specific purpose. Deliberation focuses on empowering participants, addressing knowledge and communication barriers that hinder non-expert citizens' ability to engage effectively in the policy

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