

THE PLANS, THEY ARE A-CHANGIN'

A LOOK AT 30 YEARS OF WASTE PLANNING

Duncan Wilson finds that the changing times means the need for a re-think about the best approach to waste management.

IT'S 1988. David Lange is Prime Minister. We're being given "Bad Medicine" by Bon Jovi, Rick Astley is "Never Gonna Give You Up", and Guns N' Roses' "Sweet Child o' Mine" is sounding pretty sweet. The Resource Management Act is still a twinkle in Geoffrey Palmer's eye, the town dump is still a thing – and no-one has even heard of a waste management plan.

Fast forward 30 years and things look a bit different, not least in the world of waste that we all inhabit. The temptation is to give a history lesson focusing on key events that have influenced waste planning: the introduction of the Resource Management Act in 1990 and the need to do something about the local tip; the advent of contracting for services, and user-pays rubbish bags; the flourishing then fading of the zero waste movement, and the rise of community recycling; the introduction of the Waste Minimisation Act and the need for every council to have a Waste

Management and Minimisation Plan (WMMP); the GFC and the dialling back of spending and expectations; the Green Fence and the National Sword, and the need to look at what we do with the products we collect for recycling.

However, while I am sure there are many great lessons to be had, I think the following questions are more interesting: How does all this prepare us for what is coming next? How effective has our approach to waste planning been? Is that approach what we need for the future?

The limitations of plans

I have reviewed many WMMPs that were written after the first round in 2011–2012, and as well as ones before that (a number even written by me). The truth is that the majority of actions contained within them are still to be done, targets have quietly been forgotten, and lofty objectives and visions unreported,

or just replaced with new ones (just as unlikely to be achieved). There are exceptions of course – and perhaps without the plans we do have, even less would have been done. But it hardly feels like a triumph we want to show off to the world.

I am not saying there has not been progress in the way we manage waste. Clearly, there has – but I am not convinced the progress we see has a lot to do with how great our waste planning is. In fact, I suspect that the way we plan for waste bears little relationship to the way the world actually works.

Within councils the WMMP is often one of many planning documents – and often seems to rank behind things like asset management plans, long-term plans and service reviews in terms of a basis for action. By the time whatever is in the WMMP gets squeezed through the filters of council papers, reports, budgets, consultation, public opinion, meetings, changes of elected





members, and decision makers' preferences, often little survives. For things to emerge in a recognisable form from this process usually requires the determination and persistence of a particular, sufficiently influential, individual to shepherd it through. If such a person is not there, or if they move on for whatever reason, then there is little institutional momentum to carry things forward.

To compound this, in most parts of the country an increasing majority of the waste stream is not controlled by the councils that write the plans, but by private companies that make commercial decisions. Some private sector ambitions may be worthy. But private companies have no obligation to adhere to a council's plans and so what gets done tends to have more to do with the private sector's plans than the council's.

People not plans

At the end of the day, WMMPs do not get things done. People do. A good plan may be necessary, but it is certainly not sufficient. The secret to success is not a comprehensive, nicely laid out document (as much as I may have a professional fondness for such things). We need to engage people and embed a vision and intent for action not just in one or two people (who may or may not have influence) but in a whole community. That includes private waste companies operating in that community, householders who use services, businesses wanting to make the most of opportunities, iwi who have a connection to the land, and people in communities who want to create a great place to live.

Whatever document emerges should help crystallise the community's desires and map a pathway to make them come true. I am not sure WMMPs, as they are now, can deliver this.

Sure, there is a statutory requirement to consult on WMMPs. But I am talking about something more fundamental. For most people, waste is not something they think about (unless their bin didn't get emptied that morning). Most WMMPs, while they might occasionally cause a thrill to us waste-heads, are not going to cause an outbreak of excited dinner table conversation in the average household (I know because they don't in my household, much as I may try).

The need to inspire

Put another way: waste needs to be more inspiring. To be inspiring it needs to be relevant. It needs to be not just about what we put in each bin, but about how we can make our lives better. Zero waste (all too briefly) provided that sort of vision. Perhaps it is time for something similar again.

The latest incarnation of zero waste concepts is that of the circular economy. It is most of the same ideas: designing waste out, reuse, repair services instead of products etc., but repackaged around the idea not just of reducing waste, but of

changing how we do things, so that by doing them we make the world a better place.

Imagine how that vision could look for New Zealand. Our economy is based on our natural environment – agriculture, forestry, fishing, tourism. Imagine if we applied our Kiwi ingenuity to the way we do things, so that in doing them, the basis of our economy is restored and improved: our organic waste feeds our soils, helps reduce agricultural runoff and improves waterways, produces sustainable energy and reduces the impacts of climate change; the food we produce gives health and helps feed the world; we eliminate the pathways for plastics and other problematic materials to get into the marine environment; our resource recovery centres become centres of innovation and eco-tourism attractions; we develop local uses and businesses to process reclaimed materials ...

If we want to create a better reality over the next 30 years, maybe it's time for the way we plan for waste to be a-changin'. 🌱



Duncan Wilson has over 20 years' experience working as an environmental consultant in New Zealand and the UK. He has delivered a wide range of projects including waste management and minimisation plans, waste contract procurement, development and evaluation of service delivery options, collection systems modelling and cost-benefit analysis. Duncan has extensive experience with waste data and waste composition analysis.