

# A Key Utility Service



In his first column as President of CIWM, **Professor David C Wilson MBE**, revisits his presidential address to further explain his key themes for the year ahead. The overarching theme, however, is to have solid waste management recognised as an essential utility service

**T**he over-arching theme for my presidential year is solid waste management (SWM) as one of the essential utility services underpinning modern society, sitting alongside water supply and sewerage; electricity and gas; telephone and broadband Internet; and transport. Even within the waste sector, we do not often refer to ourselves as a utility – and we certainly are not included as such by Wikipedia!

I believe that this is important if SWM is to be recognised as a political priority. I am pleased to report some progress: the UN has recently included waste collection as one element of "basic services" in the indicators measuring progress against Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) target 1.4 (part of "end poverty").

Within the overall theme, I have identified three strands, each addressed here...

## Public Health and Environmental Protection

REGULAR WASTE collection in Western Europe dates back to multiple and notorious cholera epidemics in the 19th century, so nowadays tends to be taken for granted – that is until something goes wrong as witnessed by this year's strike of waste collectors in Birmingham.

CIWM has a key role to play in facilitating and disseminating the excellent and innovative work being done by local authorities in the face of austerity, to ensure that they continue to deliver a reliable and effective service with less resources. However, as funding is cut even more over the coming years, we must not lose sight of where we have come from, that the service exists, first and foremost, to protect public health.

For more than a century, the priority in SWM was to get waste out from under foot – it was then a case of "out of sight, out of mind". Until I started, in 1974, when the first Control of Pollution Act (CoPA) was enacted, there was no regulatory control on disposal; the norm in the UK was still the uncontrolled council dumpsite. CoPA, alongside our 1972 Deposit of Poisonous Wastes Act, and similar legislation in other leading member states, provided the foundations for the first EU Waste Framework Directive in 1975. Since then, all UK waste regulation has implemented that agreed at the EU level, to which the UK has always made a very active input.

Over the last 40 years, the standards for what constitutes "environmentally sound management of wastes" have gradually been ramped up, underpinned by a growing scientific evidence base. The waste and resources industry as we know it today depends on a huge raft of regulations,

both to ensure a level playing field between member states and licensed facilities; and also to protect our legitimate industry from being undercut by those who choose to operate outside the law.

Two major priorities for CIWM are to ensure that, following Brexit, we have continuity of the strong regulations

**"Let us work together to promote the fact that solid waste management is one of the essential utility services underpinning our society. Let us ensure that the regular, daily delivery of that service to protect public health and the environment is not undermined, either by on-going cuts in local authority spending or by deregulation following Brexit"**

on which the very existence of the waste and resources industry depends; and the continuing fight against waste crime. An important part of that regulatory underpinning is health and safety – CIWM is also committed to reducing the unacceptable fatality rates in the industry.

## Reduce, Reuse, Recycle

WHEN I started in 1974, things were fairly simple: we needed to collect wastes and we needed to upgrade



*Moshi, sitting below Mount Kilimanjaro, voted for several years as the cleanest city in Tanzania. Photo courtesy of Alodia Ishengoma*

treatment and disposal facilities to meet new environmental protection regulations. It took 20-plus years to recognise the necessity for a parallel focus on the 3Rs – reduce, reuse, recycle – and on the shift from the linear "make-use-dispose" model, to a more circular economy.

We can be rightly proud in the UK that our municipal solid waste recycling rates have increased from around six percent in 1997 to 46 percent and above in 2017, but we have much more still to do.

We have achieved this progress through an integrated approach. Alongside the technical aspects, we need to focus also on involving service users and providers, among others, through participatory planning in siting new facilities and changing people's behaviours in, for example, separating our wastes for recycling.

We also need a balanced set of policy drivers, including landfill tax, recycling targets and Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR). I have done a lot of work over recent years on the evidence base for waste prevention, and how to replicate our progress on recycling for the earlier "Rs" of reduce and reuse, which remains very challenging. CIWM will continue to focus on advancing resource productivity and the circular economy, and on the further development of EPR.

## The Global Waste Crisis

CIWM'S OBJECTS under its Royal Charter are "to advance for the public benefit the art and science of wastes management worldwide...", so my third strand is "international", because waste is a global challenge. UNEP and ISWA's inaugural Global Waste Management Outlook (GWMO), which I edited, paints a very stark picture.

More than 3bn people lack this basic utility service that we take for granted – most have no waste collection service, and even wastes that *are* collected are simply dumped or burned. These numbers are growing – many African cities will double both their population and their waste generation over the next 15-20 years.

This has serious impacts on public health, through increased sickness of children and through blocked drains, leading to floods and infectious disease. It also has a negative

**"It is simply unacceptable that 40 percent of the World's population lack this basic utility service that we take for granted. We need to ensure that waste collection is extended to all people, and that uncontrolled dumping and open burning is eliminated."**

impact on the local environment and thus on local businesses and on tourism. Our best estimates in the GWMO suggest that the cumulative costs to society exceed the costs of managing wastes properly in the first place by a factor of between five and 10. But these are just the local impacts and costs; the absence of basic SWM in developing countries also has global consequences through contributions to greenhouse gas emissions and as the major source of plastics entering the



*Uncollected waste, disposed of in a watercourse in Nairobi.*

*Photo courtesy of UN-Habitat*

oceans... this affects us all.

This situation is nothing less than a global waste management crisis or emergency. The international community must respond; the GWMO calls for an increase in international development finance directed at SWM from the current 0.3 percent to just three percent up to 2030, in order to extend waste collection to all and eliminate open dumping and burning of waste. Due to the cross-cutting nature of waste management, providing basic waste services to all will contribute to no fewer than 12 out of the 17 SDGs agreed by world leaders to achieve a sustainable future for our planet. ISWA is leading a campaign for the short-term closure of the world's 50 largest dumpsites.

But it is not enough simply to wait for the international community to work with national and local governments to solve the problem from the "top down", which is why my Presidential report focuses on helping communities in the poorest countries, where the local authority often has no funds to provide a service, to tackle the problem themselves through the resource value in the wastes.

If, for example, food wastes or plastics are kept separate, they can be turned into new, useful products. With simple tools and the right knowledge, people can become self-employed recycling entrepreneurs, providing a very valuable service for the health and wellbeing of their community, and the whole planet – as well as reducing poverty and creating sustainable livelihoods.

"Making Waste Work: A Toolkit" addresses the gap identified by the GWMO for practical guidance on such low-cost "waste to wealth" technologies, which involve minimal capital investment and make products to sell in a local market. This toolkit, prepared by WasteAid UK and featured in last month's Journal, complements well another of CIWM's key priorities, which is to develop the knowledge and skills base of its members and other waste professionals around the world. ■