LEITRIM MOVES TOWARDS RESPONSIBLE WASTE MANAGEMENT

Liam Moloney

THE LAST 3 YEARS have seen huge changes in the management of household waste in County Leitrim. In that short period we have gone from virtually no recycling facilities to the present situation where Leitrim has the third highest glass recycling rate per head of any county in the country. Home composting, which was practically unknown until recently, is now occurring in over 10% of households in the county and in general we have a more responsible attitude to waste management. On the other hand, our remaining landfills have closed and the cost of landfilling waste has rocketed, while the problem of illegal dumping, although reduced, still persists.

Background

Prior to the late 1990s recycling facilities in Leitrim consisted of a mere 4 or 5 locations where recycling banks for glass and drink cans were available, for the most part as token gestures. This situation existed, not only in Leitrim but also nationwide, because the issue of waste management was not prioritised by central government.

However, the introduction of new waste management legislation in the mid 1990s saw the beginning of a more responsible approach to the issue. Local authorities were obliged to draft and implement waste management plans. The Connaught local authorities came together to draft the Connaught Waste Management Plan which was eventually adopted province-wide in 2001.

Home composting probably represents the single most environmentally beneficial activity that a householder can engage in.

The Connaught Waste Management Plan & Leitrim

So what impact will the Connaught Waste Management Plan have in Leitrim? If implemented in its entirety it will dramatically change how we manage our waste. It should result in close on half our waste being recycled, with the remainder being incinerated and/or landfilled.

In order to achieve this ambitious recycling target, more recycling facilities and schemes will have to be provided, the on-going awareness programme intensified, as well as by-laws introduced.

Recycling Facilities

To date 26 recycling bank centres, known as bring-centres, have been installed with more to come in the future. At the moment we have one bring-centre for every 1,000 people, with only County Wexford having a higher ratio of bring-centres per head of population. At all these bring-centres recycling banks for glass bottles, aluminum cans and plastic bottles are available, with textile and oil banks also available at over half the centres.

Various recycling firms are contracted to collect the materials deposited, while our Community Wardens inspect all centres 3 times weekly, removing any litter, issuing fines to litterers, and checking to see if the banks are full.

Quantities of materials collected continue to rise all the time. For example, in 2002 we collected almost twice as much glass compared to 2001 and 25 times more compared to 1999. However, despite this, the recycling rate for household waste is little more than 5% due largely to increased waste generation associated with an economy that has been dramatically growing in recent times.

In 2003 we intend to open our first civic amenity site in Carrick-on-Shannon. This will be a large staffed

recycling centre where a broad range of household waste is accepted free of charge and sent on for recycling. Other civic amenity sites will later follow in Manorhamilton, Ballinamore and Mohill.

The Plan also proposes that Leitrim's only large urban centre - Carrick-on-Shannon - receive what is known as a kerbside collection service. This would involve householders segregating their waste into 3 bins – one for recyclables such as paper and plastics, one for organic wastes such as food scraps and garden waste which can be composted, and one for waste destined for landfill.

Home-Composting Schemes

In terms of weight, between one third and a half of all waste in the average wheelie bin is organic and can be easily composted in a home composting bin. Organic waste comes from materials that are derived from plants and animals, for example food scraps, grass cuttings and newspaper / cardboard. The process is simple and involves placing the organic waste in the bin and allowing bacteria, fungi and worms to convert to compost over a period of months. The resulting compost can then be used as a soil conditioner. The advantages of home-composting include diverting waste from landfill and producing a material that benefits your garden.

To date Leitrim County Council has sold approximately 1,000 home-composting bins at a subsidised rate to members of the public. Information booklets and the opportunity to attend home-composting classes are also offered. Bins are still available and members of the public are encouraged to contact the Council for information on how to acquire one.

Landfill Situation

In 2002 County Leitrim's two remaining landfills, Mohill and Carrick-on-Shannon, closed. Currently the majority of our waste is landfilled in counties Roscommon and Galway. The extra cost in transporting our waste to these counties, along with the introduction of the Landfill Levy, has resulted in very considerable increases in bin charges.

The introduction of a pay per use system is currently being explored, whereby householders will be charged by the number of times that their bin is emptied, as opposed to the present situation where householders are charged a flat rate regardless of how much waste they put in their bin. Such a system would financially reward householders that engage in waste reduction and recycling. From spring 2003, it is also hoped to ban most packaging wastes from landfill, thereby dramatically increasing recycling rates for these materials.

In the long term, the Connaught Waste Management Plan proposes that combustible waste generated in Leitrim be sent to an incinerator proposed for Galway, with the remainder going to a new landfill proposed for the east Mayo / west Roscommon area.

Public Support

It goes without saying that public support is vital for recycling facilities and schemes provided by Leitrim County Council to be successful. To date public support has been very good with more and more materials being collected for recycling and more people participating in recycling schemes, such as home composting schemes.

Regrettably, the problem of illegal dumping at bring-centres and throughout the countryside persists, although on a somewhat reduced scale. Improvement in this area can be attributed to increased awareness among the public and in particular strict enforcement of the litter legislation by Community Wardens. In 2002 they issued almost 200 on the spot fines (€127 each), as well as investigating dozens of illegal dumps, with some resulting in successful prosecutions.

It is crucial that the partnership approach between the public and Leitrim County Council continues if the waste management challenge is to be successfully met. There is little doubt but that this issue will be resolved provided that we build on the very good groundwork carried out in recent years.

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