

# Incineration overcapacity



**Incineration overcapacity wastes money that should be invested in recycling and composting. A compelling argument against allowing new incinerators is that there just won't be enough genuinely residual combustible material to keep them fed. High rates of incineration are inconsistent with more ambitious recycling targets.**

Some in the waste industry define overcapacity as the point where current capacity exceeds current demand. They then often proceed to underestimate capacity and overestimate demand, especially those with a financial stake in building new incinerators. However, a more practical approach defines overcapacity as where capacity built and under construction is higher than future demand would be were we to reduce, re-use and recycle in line with the waste hierarchy. It makes no sense to talk about a 'capacity gap' for incinerators to burn material that could and should be recycled or composted.

In 2002 UK household waste had been rising by 3% a year, and the Prime Minister's Strategy Unit noted that if this trend continued waste could double by 2020. Coupled with a recycling rate of less than 15%, this led to a 'residual waste scare', resulting in a big push for new waste incineration capacity at any cost. Since then, the range of materials that can be readily recycled has significantly increased, anaerobic digestion (AD) has become a preferred method for treating food waste, and waste levels have actually fallen. In recognition of these trends, the Government cancelled PFI funding for 11 incineration projects between 2010 and 2014 on the basis that their capacity was no longer needed to meet landfill diversion targets.

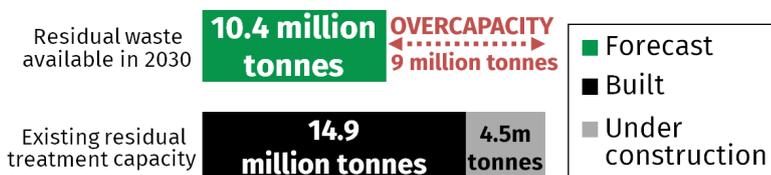
Municipal waste then and now...		
	Then (2002)	Now (2017)
Number of incinerators (UK)	11	64
Incineration capacity (UK)	2.6 million tonnes	17 million tonnes*
Tonnes arising (England)	29 million	26 million
Tonnes incinerated (England)	2.5 million	9 million
Percentage incinerated (England)	9%	35%
Recycling rate (England)	14%	42%

\* Existing and under construction (only incineration, not total residual treatment capacity)

However, due to a combination of inertia, contractual commitments, low ambitions for recycling and perverse financial incentives to burn recyclable waste, the number of incinerators has kept on growing and without intervention will continue to grow even though we already have incineration overcapacity.

Unlike the waste industry studies produced simply to promote incineration, the waste capacity forecasts from environmental consultancy Eunomia are more independent and were unsurprisingly the only figures cited in the Government's Energy from Waste Guide. Eunomia's July 2017 Residual Waste Infrastructure Review (RWIR) states: "In 2017, given the level of residual waste treatment infrastructure already committed, we forecast that the maximum recycling rate achievable in 2030 if all treatment capacity is fully utilised has fallen to 63%...in scenario 1, our analysis suggests that the UK's supply of capacity will exceed the available quantity of residual waste in 2020/21...The level of excess demand rises to 9.5 million tonnes in 2030/31..."

## Residual treatment overcapacity\*



\*Calculation of residual treatment overcapacity based on Eunomia RWIR Scenario 1 (July 2017). 10.4 million tonnes of waste is expected to be available for residual treatment in 2030. When we take away the 14.9 million tonnes of current (2017) operational residual treatment capacity, and take away the 4.5 million tonnes of capacity currently under construction (in 2017), we are left with a residual treatment overcapacity (without further new construction) of 9 million tonnes.