

Energy from Waste plants: the future of waste disposal?



Devonport Energy from Waste (EfW) plant will start taking waste from Winter 2014.

Rubbish! We create far too much of it! Consumerism is on the rise and we waste a lot of the things we buy. In fact, it is estimated that we waste one third of all the food we purchase and most things that we buy have packaging that has to be thrown away.

At the moment waste that isn't recycled goes into huge holes in the ground called landfill sites. These sites cost the government and tax payers millions of pounds each year in the form of landfill tax. There are two main problems with landfill sites. When the waste rots down it creates methane gas which contributes towards global warming. It also creates leachate liquids, if these get into the local waterways it is harmful to wildlife. In addition, some of the materials like plastic and glass stay in the ground for hundreds of years and don't rot down easily. Our landfill sites in Devon are well managed and reduce these problems to a minimum. Landfill sites are filling up so we need to find another way of disposing of our rubbish.

So what's the solution to our rubbish disposal problems? One way is to burn our rubbish which creates energy to power local houses and businesses. Scientists have estimated that burning 1tonne of rubbish will produce enough energy to power a house for a year.

An Energy from Waste (EfW) plant is currently being built in Devonport, Plymouth. It will take rubbish from the South and West Devon areas. Local Councillor Alan Bloggs said during a community meeting, 'Energy from Waste is a clean sustainable solution to our waste problems. We can't keep filling up landfill sites forever and after reducing, reusing and recycling this is the next best option.'

Others are not so sure. One local resident who lives close to the EfW site said 'Since they have been building the plant there has been more traffic in the local area, causing noise and pollution, and this will only continue to get worse once the plant opens with hundreds of lorries visiting to drop off rubbish everyday.' Another local resident is worried about gases coming out of the chimney and said 'I don't want to breathe in fumes from the burning rubbish.'

After approaching many local people this seems to be a common worry. However, no evidence has come to light that there are any health impacts on humans. Tom Paget, a scientist working at Clean Air industries, said 'Today's EfW plants are not like the old style incinerators, the technology is much improved. All of the gases and smoke are scrubbed by filters before being released into the atmosphere. In fact emissions from EfW plants only make up 1% of the total country's emissions; traffic and industry make up 50%.'

Local resident Mrs Smith, voiced another common concern saying 'I don't want to look out of my door everyday and see a big ugly factory. And what are they going to do with all of the ash left behind?'

A spokesperson for the EfW plant said 'Incinerator Bottom Ash (IBA) is in fact a very useful material and all of the ash left over, will be recycled and turned into road aggregate. As I'm sure you will agree, this is a positive way of using an end product of the incineration process.'

The EfW plant is due to start accepting rubbish from late 2014. Meanwhile there continues to be a hot topic of conversation in the local community. Maybe the question we should be asking is, if we all made more effort to reduce our rubbish in the first place, would we need to build an EfW plant at all?

We would like your views on the plans for an EfW plant. Please write and tell us your thoughts!