

Media Release



Review of Waste Management in Northern Ireland

Around 90 per cent of the waste produced in Northern Ireland is not being robustly monitored, and this will create considerable challenges for future waste management planning and forecasting. That is amongst the findings of a new report published today (Friday 5 July 2024) by the Comptroller and Auditor General, Dorinnia Carville.

The Review of Waste Management in Northern Ireland provides a factual overview of the waste management infrastructure and regulatory framework, as well as a summary of previous and future waste targets. The Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs is responsible for making legislation and implementing policy, while local councils have operational responsibility for the collection and processing of municipal waste.

Around 7.7 million tonnes of waste are estimated to be generated annually in Northern Ireland. One million tonnes of this, mainly household waste, is collected by local councils. While detailed data on council-collected waste is collated and publicly available, this only represents around 10 per cent of the total waste collected here. In the case of the remaining 90 per cent, there is a lack of available and accurate information, with a reliance, instead, on estimates. Today's report notes that this lack of robust data will make it more difficult to both plan and report on future waste management targets.

The report also identifies gaps in information regarding landfill capacity here. 1.29 million tonnes of waste was sent to landfill in 2022-23. Disposal of waste in landfills should be the last resort for managing waste, behind other measures such as prevention and recycling. As a result, Northern Ireland currently has a legislative requirement to place a cap (of 10 per cent) on the proportion of total waste sent to landfill by 2035. However, while landfill sites are regulated by the Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) and each site has a maximum capacity, the NIEA does not have a statutory requirement to track landfill capacities. As a result, detailed information regarding when landfill in Northern Ireland could run out is not known, making effective planning for the 2035 target very challenging.

The report notes a delay in the publication of a new Waste Management Strategy by DAERA. The previous strategy was published in 2013 and set the policy framework until 2020. A new strategy was originally due by the end of 2023 – a 2024 publication date has yet to be confirmed.

Commenting on today's report, Dorinnia Carville said:

"Effective waste management is a critical part of modern society. As Northern Ireland moves towards its target of Net Zero by 2050, optimising waste management practices is even more important. The new Waste Management Strategy will play a pivotal role in these efforts, requiring clear and measurable ambitions and performance targets.

This will, in turn, require robust data and access to accurately recorded and complete information on all waste practices in Northern Ireland. The current gaps in waste management data are not unique to Northern Ireland, and this report recommends DAERA continues to engage with its counterparts in Great Britain as part of wider efforts to address this issue at a UK-wide level."

Today's report also highlights that, overall, councils have been successful in achieving their landfill and recovery targets, with a 2020 target for 50 per cent recycling rate for household waste being met in 2019.

In 2022-23:

- 50 per cent of waste collected by councils was sent for recycling;
- 25 per cent of council collected waste was sent for energy recovery (i.e. waste is converted into some form of usable energy); and
- 23 per cent of council collected waste was sent to landfill. This included around 120,000 tonnes of biodegradable, a decline from 140,000 tonnes in 2021-22.

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Notes for Editors

1. The Comptroller and Auditor General (C&AG) is Head of the Northern Ireland Audit Office (the Audit Office). She and the NIAO are totally independent of Government. The C&AG certifies the accounts of Government Departments and a range of other public sector bodies. She has statutory authority to report to the Assembly on the economy, efficiency and effectiveness with which departments and public bodies use their resources. Her reports are published as Assembly papers.

THIS STATEMENT IS ISSUED ON THE STRICT UNDERSTANDING THAT IT IS NOT FOR PUBLICATION OR BROADCAST BEFORE *00.01 hrs* ON FRIDAY 05 JULY 2024

2. The report is available on the Audit Office website at www.niauditoffice.gov.uk. The report is embargoed until 00.01 hrs on Friday 5 July 2024