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Feedback from Farington

REPORT OF OUR VISIT TO WASTE PLANT AT FARINGTON, LEYLAND, LANCASHIRE & OUR MEETING WITH SOME LOCAL RESIDENTS

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By Stephen Brice & Jeffrey Lever

Pinkham Way Alliance (PWA) has been following the story of the Mechanical & Biological Treatment (MBT) plant at Farington for over a year. It opened in late 2010, and during the commissioning period, there were severe problems with the bio-filters (the waste industry seems riddled with Orwellian 'greening' of ordinary words, especially with the two prefixes 'bio' and 'eco').

The function of bio-filters is to provide a successful breeding home for odour-eating bacteria; they are plainly difficult to balance, particularly in terms of moisture levels, and Veolia confirmed during our visit to Southwark that they need a continuous process of tweaking. Speaking from his industry knowledge, the Veolia director remarked that Farington (which is run by the company Global Renewables) had been a 'nightmare' ever since opened.

The principle is that air saturated with odour-producing bacteria passes through the filters and the odour is removed before the air leaves the plant. As the website of Global Renewables, says even now: "Everything happens indoors to prevent noise and odour escaping."

From its inception, there have been severe odour problems at Farington. It seemed last year that the initial faults had been rectified, but in the autumn they returned. Since then the operators have tried various strategies, the last one being to raise the height of the 5 stacks on the building (see photo, below). The first stack has just been raised. They are also installing a Regenerative Thermal Oxygen unit. The GR website describes this as follows:

"Our process pulls air through the compost beds in order to achieve effective composting. Our investigations have shown that the most odorous air from the process is the air that is pulled through the compost beds. This is the air that will pass through the RTO unit. Industry experts recognise RTC as being highly effective for the control of odorous emissions into the atmosphere.

This equipment uses heat to eliminate the odorous vapours produced during the composting process and only allows naturally occurring substances such as water and carbon dioxide vapours to be emitted. It is a gas powered self-contained unit that works by oxidising (heating) the air from the compost halls at temperatures up to 950o. It is designed to remove 99.7 % of the odorous compound in this air. The unit contains ceramic beds that recover between 90 to 95% of the energy used from the oxidation process."

A Freedom of Information Act (FOI) request to Lancashire County Council revealed that, since October 2011, just under 400 complaints had been investigated. In general they had come either from residents up to a mile away from the plant – there were some from further away – or businesses in the industrial park adjoining the site. Descriptions of the smell include 'bad dustbin', 'sickly', 'wet mop', 'putrid', 'rotting bin odour', 'dirty nappy' etc.

The number of complaints to the Environment Agency in the first couple of months of 2012 is, pro rata, rather higher than to the County Council.

The weather during the visit was fairly still.

Stephen Brice had spoken to the plant's Community Liaison Officer a number of times in the early summer of 2011. However, attempts to contact her to arrange a meeting during our visit were fruitless, and we went to the site to see what we could see.

We went to the Education Centre, the circular building in the picture, and talked for about 20 minutes to the receptionist. Although the plant is called an MBT, it should be remembered that this is a generic name, and the processes there overlap with, but are not all identical to, what is proposed for Pinkham Way.

The activities at Farington are Materials Recovery and composting of various organic wastes. The plant accepts 3,000 tons of residual waste, 1,000 tons of dry recycling and 1,000 tons of green and kitchen waste per week. The residual waste is sorted – by hand, by shifts of 200 or so employees – and the recyclables are sent into the dry recycling stream (thereby, presumably, contaminating it).

We remarked that there had been some odours as we walked towards the building, and the receptionist agreed that there had been 'some small problems'. However, the smell was not as strong as at the newer Southwark Integrated Waste Facility in London, which we visited recently.

Local Residents

The FOI answers revealed that quite a number of the complaints had come from a small network of residential streets around 600 metres to the SE of the plant. A visit there proved very illuminating. We explained to the first couple we spoke to why we were there – this was lucky as their impression was that we were either Jehovah's Witnesses or selling double glazing.

Their reaction was:

"It's been a nightmare. Our lives have been taken away from us. If there are plans to put one near you, do not allow it and fight it with everything. Don't believe a word of any assurances given to you."

We were then introduced to a friend of theirs, who had been asked by the Environment Agency (EA) to keep a diary for three months, detailing any odours and their intensity, and recording any complaints she made (38 over the three months).

This lady said that, when the smell was bad, she could not go into the garden, could not open windows and could not hang washing out. (She has provided a short statement about the diary, and had given a copy to us. The statement includes a description of the loss of amenity, above.)

Other residents who had joined our discussion corroborated her experience of living near this plant. We were told that one resident had been advised by his doctor to move house, and that others who suffered from chest complaints had been told that the problems had been exacerbated by the odours. We are trying to verify these accounts.

Another resident, a former police communications manager, said that she often woke in the night; in the early morning of the 30th May she had woken and let her dog into the garden. Although her garden faces away from the plant, the smell was so strong that she almost gagged. She will also, we understand, be providing a short statement.

The residents were unanimously dismissive of the waste plant operators, who had made promises and subsequent undertakings that had not been met, and of the public authorities, both Lancashire County Council and the EA, who, they feel, had taken no notice at all of their plight.

(From a phone conversation with a former local councilor the following day, we gather that, for the first time, a formal letter has been received from the EA, finally admitting the problem, but still seeking the cause. The letter is being forwarded to us.)

The residents pointed out that the area was known in the past for heavy industry, which smelled. These residents therefore believe that they are by no means over-sensitive to smells. However, in the past, when there were problems with odours from industry, they were much more easily dealt with. The residents remarked that the plant is no more than a factory, so why could the regulator not deal more stringently with it, even by going as far as revoking the operating permit?

The smell

Although it was quite a still day, we did from time to time get a smell from the plant – sour and desiccating – it felt as though the saliva was drying in one's mouth. We smelt it while we were talking to the residents, and asked if we'd be able to talk outside when the smell was bad (today, they said, was a good day). The answer was an emphatic **NO**.

However, they did say that, perhaps since one of the stacks had been raised, the pattern of smells had changed – in that they tended to come more when there was a gusty wind – and that the smell itself had altered. The plant operators are in the process of increasing the height of other stacks in the hope of alleviating the odour nuisance. Although, on speaking to the local former councillor today, 1st June, we find that the smell has been as bad as ever, and more complaints have been registered.

Other remarks:

We stopped at a café which was probably over a mile from the plant. The owner said that the smell had been appalling, particularly last year, when there had also been a plague of flies. We will be following up the latter remark.