Summary of Report of Visit to Veolia & Southwark Council Integrated Waste Management Facility (IWMF), 43 Devon Street, Peckham, London, SE15

By Dame Emma Kirkby, Councillor Juliet Solomon (Haringey Council), Stephen Brice (Pinkham Way Alliance) and Jeffrey Lever (Southgate Green Association)

The full report is available on the Southgate Green Association website, or can be posted to you − please contact the Southgate Green Association.

The visit

Our visit took place on Monday 21 May 2012 at 2.30 pm.

The Southwark Integrated Waste Management Facility (IWMF)

The IWMF is being operated by Veolia Environmental Services who have a 25- year PFI (Private Finance Initiative) contract with Southwark Council. The project has remediated the former gas works site, off Old Kent Road. Southwark Council says that "the facility sets the standard for waste management in London".

First Impressions

The facility is located on the southern part of an industrial estate known as South Eastern Gas Works on Devon Street, a side street off the north-east side of the Old Kent Road. It's a complex of new, steel-framed, panel clad, very spacious, hangar-like buildings housing the various processes and some ancillary offices. There is ample access and manoeuvring space for heavy vehicles, and the visual impression is one of a large, clean and tidy industrial facility, and purposeful organisation.

Approaching the location on the Old Kent Road some 200 metres from the facility's air extraction apparatus, on a gusty day, there was a faint smell of household residual waste around the south end of Devonshire Grove. When immediately outside a take-away food shop, this smell was masked by the stronger smell of the cooked food. However, 10 metres away, the food smell was gone, and the waste smell was restored. At a position further away north-west along Old Kent Road, the same faint smell of household residual waste, and then a stronger, putrescent smell were experienced. We report further on odour nuisance later in this report.

London Borough of Southwark

Southwark is a unitary waste authority (i.e. not attempting to work as part of a group of authorities). It has 251,300 residents, occupying 128,100 properties. The Veolia contract includes the collection of the refuse as well as its subsequent management. Occupiers are expected to divide their refuse into three batches for collection: recyclables, garden and vegetable waste, and residual waste.

Waste arisings and capacity of facility

It is estimated that the present collection and throughput of 115,000 tonnes per annum from the borough will rise to 150,000 tpa by 2031. The facility has been sized at 85% of Southwark's municipal requirement, say Veolia. They set this in the context that the facility needs to be fully used to be economically efficient.

Size of site

The size of the site is 6.75 acres (2.73 hectars). There is also ample space to construct an additional large building, if further capacity is required. The site also has flexibility to increase recycling by one-third, and also to accommodate a reduction the amount of residual waste arising.

Costs and length of contract
The value of the contract is £665 million. The facility cost £62 million to build. Total capital expenditure was £98 million. The PFI grant was £34.5 million. Veolia fund their capital costs from their own equity and not from bank loan finance. Asked the reason for the 25-year length of the contract, Veolia stated that this is to maximise the utilisation of the plant. Even so, it is expected that major refurbishment will be necessary some 12 years, or so, into the contract.

Vehicular traffic
There are 120 lorry movements per day. The movements do not occur equally spread throughout the day, but are bunched around shift and collection patterns. Therefore there are busier and less busy periods. It appeared to be a less busy period during our visit. The personal vehicles of the staff add to vehicle movements; we did not ascertain numbers.

After Veolia's presentation, we were taken around the following parts of the site:

The Reuse and Recycling Centre
This is a very spacious, clean building, like an aircraft hanger. There are plentiful bins, bays and receptacles for disposing of everything from oil to electrical goods to other household items. We thought this was very well designed and convenient.

The Recycling Discovery Centre (Education Centre)
This is a spacious area, filled with poster displays, examples of many recylable items, such as plastic milk bottle tops, and large working models of MBT conveyor belts, separation and screening devices, etc. Informative, and fun for younger visitors.

The Mass Recycling Facility
This separates out the different materials that householders have put in the recycling bin. The recyclable waste travels throughout this plant on a system of conveyor belts and separation and screening devices which sort the waste. A less pleasant working environment was a room where six staff were hand-picking material from the conveyor that the machines had failed to sort correctly.

The Mechanical & Biological Treatment Plant (MBT)
We were not sure whether this was working at normal capacity yet, and could see it only through a glass screen. Even from this position, there was a strong odour, as one might expect. We saw some bays of putrefying residual waste waiting to be taken away for incineration.

A Control and Monitoring Room
We also briefly visited this large office where about eight staff worked before various computer screens which monitored aspects of the plant's performance. These data are also transmitted directly to the Environment Agency, and they cannot be modified by Veolia staff, we were informed.

Final discussion
Back in the meeting room for a final discussion and further questions. It is clear that the present outcome for Southwark, a unitary waste authority, is very different than what is proposed for North London.

<u>Proximity principle & scale of operation</u>
The confines of the borough boundary ensure that the proximity principle is implemented in Southwark, at least to the extent of the confines of that boundary. Those confines have also set a limit to the size of the waste management facility, albeit that Southwark has opted for a single main facility rather than two or more smaller ones.

By contrast, the North London Waste Authority Area sweeps aside the boundaries of seven boroughs, with their proposal that 300,000 tpa of household residual waste, the equivalent of three to four boroughs-worth, should be brought to a single site at Pinkham Wood. No proximity principle here, and a disproportional scale of operation in a single residential locality.

Nature of site selected

It is obvious that Southwark's choice of a long-established industrial estate for their facility displays a commonsense lacking in the NLWA's purchase of Pinkham Wood site, an open green space and Grade 1 SINC.[1]

Locality observations and odour nuisance

We have already mentioned that on the day of the visit we noticed odour nuisance 200 metres from the plant. By chance we came across a branch of a well known national chain of stores, which has a rear car park and automated doors 160 metres from the waste plant and facing it.

This store has suffered bad smells since the beginning of the year, bad enough for the staff regularly to call out drain contractors to examine their toilets, etc. No fault can be found with the toilets, we confirmed with the store manager, and there was no problem before January. The staff were unaware of the presence of the waste plant on the industrial estate to the rear. What is now clear is that what is the persistent faint smell from the waste plant in the vicinity of a building can be intensified when it has entered the building and is then not rapidly extracted by industrial scale ventilation. In this case, the automatic doors from the store car park regularly open to let in more odiferous air, and close trapping it indoors.

This gives us very great concern for the conditions that would arise inside the thousands of residential buildings and dozens of schools in the vicinity of the Pinkham Wood site were a huge MBT to be operating there.

Clearly, the necessary ventilation within an MBT building becomes a problem for the air quality outside, in the vicinity of, and some considerable distance from, the building. It was explained to us that the ventilation air from the waste plant passes through biofilters before leaving the building. We have no reason to dispute that the brand new system at Southwark is as good as any, probably better than most.

We therefore conclude that if such plants are to be placed (unideally) within urban settings, it is imperative that

a) they be smaller,

b) thereby reducing the volume waste being concentrated on to one site,

c) and so reducing the volume of odiferous air being discharged,

d) and therefore enabling the installation of larger biofiliters in proportion to smaller amounts of odiferous discharge, and

e) also giving a better chance for the dispersal effect of the wind on a smaller volume of odiferous air.

[1] Site of Importance to Nature Conservation, borough-wide importance.

If the moderate-sized Southwark plant is looking too big by this measure, the massive one proposed for Pinkham Wood is wholy unacceptable.

Conclusions

1) Overall, we found the Southwark IWMF to be a modern facility, at a reasonably suitable location, well-run by people who are doing their best. We have no reason to question Southwark Council's assertion that "the facility sets the standard for waste management in London".

2) The criticisms which follow of the current proposals for North London are not undermined by the above, but reinforced. For example, compared to the odour problem that even Southwark has not overcome, there is every reason to believe that the ill-judged North London proposals will produce something far worse. The monstrous scale of the proposed MBT, and very poor site selection of Pinkham Wood are two reasons.

3) We note the operation of the proximity principle to some extent at Southwark, but not at all in North London.

4) We note the reasonable choice of an industrial brownfield site at Southwark compared to an open green space nature conservation area at Pinkham Wood, contrary to good stewardship and common sense.

5) The existing and potential site capacity as established by the now operational IWMF at Southwark coroborates other evidence presented by Pinkham Way Alliance and by waste experts Bywaters, that the capacity estimate of sites of 50,000 tpaph chosen by the NLWP is far too low, and out of line with actual experience. If applied in the NLWP it will result in the unnecessary despoliation of new land for waste management. The true figure as evidenced at Southwark is in excess of 65,000 tpaph, with very likely potential to reach the 80,000 tpaph estimated by the GLA.

6) The Southwark facility brings together, spaciously, all six facilities mentioned on page 2, within 2.37 hectares. Therefore there is no practical reason why available waste sites smaller than this, which exist in all parts of North London, including the inner London boroughs, should not be utilised for compact individual facilities such as an MBT, or small groupings of facilities, such as a Materials Recovery Facility with a Reuse and Recycling Centre. This would make efficient use of all established waste sites which the public already accept as such, avoiding the controversial requisitioning of inappropriate new land, and applying the proximity principle in deeds not words.

7) The Southwark MBT demonstrates that, unfortunately, even a "state of the art" MBT of its size will produce unacceptable odour nuisance. The lesson to be drawn before repeating the mistake, is to build smaller MBTs with bigger, more effective biomass filters, otherwise a complete rethink will be necessary, to site them far from centres of population.
