

Governing sustainable waste management Summary Report on Stockton case study

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1 Background

The *Governing Sustainable Waste Management* project¹ seeks to examine what facilitates, and what prevents, the development and implementation of sustainable Municipal Waste Policy (MWP) in the North East of England, and the wider lessons which can be learned for local authorities across the UK. The project involves an overview of MWP across the region, and in-depth analysis of three case-studies: Durham County Council; Newcastle City Council; and Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council.

This report presents in summary the findings of a case study of the municipal waste policy network in the area of Stockton Borough Council (SBC). It is based on analysis of relevant documents and a series of interviews with SBC officers, politicians, officers of other local authorities and representatives of voluntary and commercial organisations concerned with waste management in the sub-region.

This summary is primarily intended for those familiar with SBC's current waste policy situation and so gives little in the way of background. A brief sketch of SBC's MWP is included as annex A, but otherwise please refer to the full report, available via www.geography.dur.ac.uk/swm.

The report first outlines the key barriers to the development of sustainable MWP for SBC; positive features of SBC's approach to MWP; factors enabling SBC's good performance; positive lessons from SBC's practice for other authorities and governments; and issues requiring further reflection.

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2 Facing the challenges

SBC is justifiably proud of its achievements in turning around a failing service area to being nationally recognised for the progress it has made. This has been formally recognised by the Audit Commission through grading SBC's 'Care for Your Area' section, which incorporates waste management, as providing an "excellent", three-star service that has excellent prospects for improvement' (AC 2004). It is to the authority's credit that, whilst likely to achieve immediate targets, current documents indicate that it is already facing the tough challenges that lie ahead in maintaining its excellent progress (SBC 2004a; SBC 2004b).

Nevertheless, in developing MWP, SBC has encountered, and will continue to face, a number of challenges. In common with other local authorities across the UK, rising waste volumes and policy demands are testing existing frameworks and systems of waste management. Shifts in the policy framework signal the growing European and national policy intention to develop more sustainable waste management and planning, with consequent implications for the future of local policy.

Based on a review of existing literature and interviews with key actors in MWP in North East England, we find that four different sets of barriers are commonly identified as preventing progress towards more sustainable MWP (Bulkeley, Watson et al. 2004). This section summarises the extent to which each of these sets of barriers have been encountered in SBC, and their implications for the development of sustainable MWP.

2.1 Institutional fragmentation

'Institutional fragmentation' refers to ineffective divisions of responsibility and to unproductive relationships within and between institutions.

2.1.1 Internal fragmentation

Waste has historically been seen as an 'end-of-pipe', operational issue, confined institutionally to the 'service' rather than 'strategic' functions of local authorities. In Stockton, this has been substantially overcome both through a reorganisation of the 'Service Stockton' department in the wake of the 2001 best value review, and through positive links with the LA21 team and cabinet members, so that waste is now considered to have a strategic component and as demanding political attention. However, in order to develop a more holistic approach to managing waste, links with other departments in the local authority will become more important in the future.

Common with many unitary authorities, in SBC there is a striking lack of coordination between waste management and land use planning. In facing upcoming challenges, it is likely that closer cooperation will be required. Further, as the waste agenda shifts towards integrated resource management, closer working with appropriate sections of the council to develop local industrial and commercial capacity for resource cycling is likely to become more important.

2.1.2 Minimal joint working on Teesside

Beyond SBC, attempts have been made through the SITA contract, JWMS and a joint response to the fridges debacle, to gain economies of scale and more 'joined up' thinking with neighbouring local authorities. However there is little evidence of new joint initiatives being pursued, and an apparent lack of political commitment behind existing joint working arrangements. The relative lack of joint working is perhaps unsurprising, given that the partnership arrangement owes most to the historical context of the four authorities being separate WCA under the CCC WDA, leaving little heritage of collaboration on strategic and planning issues. Difficulties with joint working are exacerbated where authorities are on different policy paths and have varying political, staffing and resource commitments to waste management.

Central government policy has added obstacles to joint working. Although DEFRA guidance advocates a partnership approach, this is primarily aimed at two-tier local authorities where collection and disposal responsibilities remain split. Moreover, informal feedback from central government has suggested that SBC should develop its own strategy and initiatives, and indeed applications for funding depend on the former and tend to promote the latter. As competitively allocated grant income becomes more essential in meeting government targets, there is less incentive to co-operate and establish joint schemes. Equally, with the increasing political importance of waste, it is likely to gravitate to the central control of a local authority, rather than being on the margins where more innovative and partnership approaches might be possible. The potential economic importance of the LATS scheme, for example, seems likely to drive waste management nearer to the heart of a local authority's self-interest.

Teesside has the potential to profit, both in terms of waste management performance and economic development, by developing resource cycling industries. To do so is likely to demand more active cooperation between the authorities as they need to link more actively with a wider range of industrial partners working at regional and sub-regional level to develop the innovative implementation of appropriate technologies.

A clear and agreed position on the role of the WMDO in promoting joint working and a coherent sub-regional approach to waste management would be helpful in realising the potential of the WMDO position in relation to these objectives. A current review of joint working by consultants *Urban Mines*, funded under DEFRA's WIP programme, is certainly timely.

2.1.3 Fragmentation at other levels of government

Institutional fragmentation in waste management policy is not limited to the local level. For example, the key split between waste management and planning is the continuation of a split running through national and regional structures. Achieving better institutional integration at other levels of government, and establishing a role for regional government in relation to waste management could assist in improving policy co-ordination at sub-regional and local levels.

2.2 Instability and uncertainty

One key issue confronting the development of sustainable MWP and practice nation-wide is the instability and uncertainty in the sector, which has been created by the near ceaseless change, and associated policy-vacuum, in the institutional, legislative and financial context of waste management since the early 1990s (Davoudi 2000).

As addressed in 4.1 below, the EfW plant has given SBC a stable framework for policy development. However, the reliance on the EfW Plant may be an uncertain strategy over the longer term. As the landfill diversion targets required by the EU Landfill Directive ratchet upwards, any exclusion or active discouragement of EfW as a disposal route could leave SBC exposed. For some, the SITA contract is also seen to discourage the development of alternative re-use, recycle and recovery initiatives and gives a degree of inflexibility to the waste management options available to SBC. While there is presently no conflict between meeting current recycling/composting targets and the EfW contract, in the future this may not be the case. In seeking to *minimise* waste, the rise in waste volumes which currently ensures clear water between the volume sent to the EfW plant and the minimum required – despite increasing proportions of waste being recycled – may disappear. Finally, the very presence of a means of getting rid of waste at a very favourable price may prove a disincentive for the politically difficult and potentially costly initiatives needed to reduce waste in the first place.

2.3 Money matters: financial pressures and resources

In Stockton, despite low basic disposal costs and relative success in securing grants, money of course remains a key issue for MWP, with estimates that a further £500k is needed for the waste budget every year (SBC 2004b). This is due to the growing volumes of waste (in part as a result of increased population) and because of the need to implement recycling and reduction schemes in order to comply with BVPIs. Given the low gate fee charged for sending waste to the EfW plant, the collection of recyclates has proven comparatively expensive.

The financial pressure brought by the changing nature of waste disposal has in part been off-set by the introduction by central government of one-off, competitive grants for establishing new management options. SBC have entered whole-heartedly into the 'bid' culture which such schemes generate, with a generally good level of success, securing around £1.8m from DEFRA funds in recent years. Whilst SBC has done relatively well out of recent funding opportunities, the shift towards funding MWP by means of competitive bids to national government presents a number of issues. Even for those who are successful problems can arise in managing the running costs of the schemes after they have been established with grant funding for capital expenditure. Further, the timescales attached to grants, either to set them up or to complete them, are usually short which makes project management difficult and can preclude schemes with a longer timescale.

SBC has also tapped into other external resources which have enabled it to experiment more broadly with waste management initiatives. The Interreg project will have a less direct impact on immediate targets, but through changing cultures around waste may enable future targets to be attained. Equally, the WRAP scheme to target home composters for low income housing has provided funding for the most extensive minimisation scheme being developed in the Borough, though one which does not immediately have payback in terms BVPIs.

2.4 Policy goals, political will and public participation

One of the key changes in the shift towards more sustainable waste management options is the changing role of the public. Whereas previous waste policies based on local collection and disposal merely required that rubbish was put out, increasingly the public are being enrolled to sort and separate wastes, and to participate in a range of different reduce, re-use, recovery and recycling schemes.

While SBC is implementing a range of measures to encourage public participation in existing schemes, in common with many other local authorities, there has been relatively little public participation in terms of the planning of waste strategies and the design of specific schemes. Whilst the JWMS underwent substantial consultation, the conventional approach adopted represented a superficial level of engagement. In the development of Stockton's own MWMS, public engagement has been non-existent. The absence of such forms of participation in waste management is not unique to SBC. It reflects the framing of waste policy as an essentially technical issue in which the public have little role to play.

The value of public engagement lies in its ability to achieve objectives beyond the conventional aims of traditional WMP. In the rare cases where meaningful engagement in MWP has been pursued, positive results in terms of the acceptance of controversial schemes and involvement in initiatives (Petts 2001). More generally, active engagement of communities can help engender local 'ownership' of schemes enhancing participation; and can encourage participants to reflect more deeply on their own behaviour and their responsibility for the wastes they produce (NRWF 2003). The challenge of engaging the public is something which local authorities can no longer afford to neglect.

While there is growing interest at European and national levels in pursuing local policies for waste minimisation, UK statutory targets are focused solely on recycling and composting. Pragmatic pursuit of targets by local authorities does not necessarily promote the most environmentally effective practices. In celebrating the successes of SBC it is therefore important to not uncritically take progress towards existing targets and policy goals as necessarily representing progress towards sustainability. In SBC, there is a willingness to engage with a broader, and more politically challenging, sustainability agenda, but as yet it is unclear how this will be pursued.

3 Driving Change

In the face of these challenges, several positive features of MWP in SBC are particularly notable:

- The integration of waste management in the authority
- The political support for addressing the waste agenda
- National recognition for achievements in the waste field
- The development of local networks with community and businesses
- The development of an EU funded project
- The range of schemes and initiatives which have been implemented
- An engagement with a broad sustainability agenda for waste

We here address these in relation to four key drivers of positive change in the authority.

3.1 Infrastructural security

The importance of the security afforded to SBC's waste management by the EfW plant can not be underestimated. The plant and the contractual arrangements with SITA have provided infrastructural security and predictability in the basic costs of managing most municipal waste. With capacity to dispose of waste without reliance on landfill, SBC is avoiding the difficulties which many other authorities are facing as they have to move away from landfill but without either the political possibility of building an EfW facility, or fully proven alternative technologies. The lack of pressing and potentially controversial decisions on the selection of alternatives to landfill, coupled with the relatively low costs of waste disposal in Stockton, have provided a strong foundation for waste management innovation and performance. Nonetheless, in the medium to long term, the contract for the EfW plant may prove more ambivalent, depending primarily on the direction of developing legislation.

3.2 Institutional cohesion

In the main SBC has a relatively high level of institutional integration around MWP, both within the authority and through networks involving key partners outside it.

One of the central ingredients in shaping Stockton's successful MWP are the people involved. Stockton has a significant number of enthusiastic and committed staff in its waste management team, which allows for specialisation in the tasks undertaken and a valuable degree of flexibility. Officers spoke of the importance of just being 'able to get on with it', as well as a sense of a shared endeavour around the waste agenda which the local authority as a whole values, with active support from senior officers, including the Chief Executive, and from an energetic and pro-active Cabinet member. Strong connections with the LA21 team have also been important, providing a broader view of the 'waste' issue and how it can be addressed. The Urban Environment Task Group (UETG) extends the institutional embedding of waste along with other environmental issues.

SBC has participated actively in regional and national networks, promoting the profile of the authority in relation to its work on waste management and establishing key links to 'gatekeeper' organisations, such as DEFRA and WRAP. These connections have been established in part by the high political profile of the waste issue within the authority, and the actions of the Cabinet member and local MP in securing contacts in DEFRA and the high profile visit of the Environment Minister to Stockton. These connections have been significant in securing funding for SBC, as well as ensuring that officers in the authority are up to date with the changing policy context.

3.3 Innovative thinking

The third driver which has shaped the approach taken to MWP in SBC has been its ability and willingness to 'think outside the box' on waste issues. Three factors which have created this mindset can be identified:

- decision to separate the strategic and operational functions of waste management, freeing up space to establish a strategic vision for MWP and secure the resources to pursue it.
- effective collaboration between the waste management team and LA21
- the Interreg project has helped SBC to think beyond the current framework of UK MWP

Such innovative thinking leads to effective practice in developing sustainable MWP, by providing a medium- to long-term view of the challenges ahead. While chasing immediate targets can encourage reactive approaches to MWP, which frequently focus on the 'low hanging fruit', a recognition of the more

challenging targets ahead serves to encourage more strategic thinking, and to put short-term targets into perspective.

3.4 Financial opportunities

One of the impacts of the combination of infrastructural security, institutional integration and innovative thinking has been to enable the pursuit of financial opportunities for the development of new waste management initiatives. The importance of the successful national grants gained, totalling £1.8 million from DEFRA together with the in kind resources gained from the WRAP project can not be underestimated. Not only will they enable SBC to meet their initial BVPI targets, but they have also provided the authority with a basis to enter the 'positive spiral' of avoiding penalties under LATS and being on track to meet future goals.

4 Lessons to Learn

Reflecting on the experience of SBC in addressing the challenges of the new waste agenda at the local level, this section considers the lessons which can be learnt by relevant national government departments, regional bodies, networks, associations and other local authorities as they seek to develop sustainable MWP.

4.1 Moving Forward

In our analysis, five lessons stand out as providing insights for how other local authorities could further develop their MWP by overcoming some of the key barriers:

- *Critical mass* – the effective delivery of MWP across any one authority demands a certain number of people and level of resources – a 'critical mass' – to work effectively and proactively across the increasing range of responsibilities which MWP entails.
- *Strategic priority* – specifically, a division of responsibilities needs to be established to free up dedicated staff time for strategic issues: identifying and pursuing funding stream; and establishing and maintaining contacts and networks across and beyond the authority.
- *Political support* – committed officers can do much in an ambivalent political environment, but with effective political support progress can be faster and more far reaching.

- *Active networking* – locally engaging relevant partners, nationally providing links to key gatekeepers, and internationally learning from other local authorities serves both to raise the profile of SBC, and to provide critical resources.
- *Embracing change* – a readiness to take on new challenges and to ‘think outside the box’ can yield dividends; this demands the creation of a culture in which there is a willingness to experiment and to take (modest) risks.

4.2 Remaining Challenges

In addition to focusing on the positive elements of the MWP in Stockton, we believe it is important to reflect on the challenges which have proven to be difficult to overcome, in order that both SBC and others may learn from these experiences. In particular, we consider three issues to be worthy of further reflection:

- *The challenges of joint working* – although SBC, with its partner authorities, have developed some effective means of working together within given parameters, their experience demonstrates the difficulties of advancing joint working between authorities. To an extent this reflects generic local authority structures and cultures across fields of responsibility. However, the waste management field itself has specific pressures – such as an emphasis on the development of individual MWMS, increasing dependence on competitive grants – which count against authorities realising national government rhetoric on partnership working, and potentially developing more far-reaching approaches to developing local resource economies.
- *Involving the public* – historically a service-oriented, technical field of responsibility, there is an absence of meaningful engagement with the public on issue of MWP. Notwithstanding the innovative work done in waste education, SBC continues to have a relatively paternalistic attitude to the role of the public, as demonstrated for example in the relative lack of consultation in drawing up waste strategies. Actively involving the public in shaping basic strategy has the potential to both draw public knowledge into strategies and so ensure that initiatives are designed with the views and attitudes of the public in mind, while also giving a wider constituency ‘ownership’ of waste management in their local area.

- *Reliance on one technological solution* – while the infrastructural security afforded by the EfW plant has served SBC well to date, issues over the longer term are perhaps more uncertain. Clearly, investing in major infrastructures demands the negotiation of long-term contracts, but this has the effect of ‘freezing’ the infrastructural provision for MWP at one moment in a rapidly moving policy landscape, potentially leaving the authority vulnerable to changing goals, principles and legislation. This suggests that as many local authorities grapple with the development of new technologies for waste management in order to meet their targets, the avoidance of being ‘locked in’ to one set of infrastructural and institutional relationships would be prudent.

5 Conclusion

The strategic and forward thinking approach adopted to MWP in Stockton have seen the authority make good progress, both in terms of meeting targets set by central government and in engaging with a broader agenda of moving towards sustainable waste management. Stockton’s experience provides important lessons for those seeking to develop sustainable MWP across the UK, and pause for thought as to how policy and practice in the authority could be improved. The biggest challenges facing SBC, like many other authorities, will revolve around how to maintain this progress and adapt to changing policy circumstances, such as engaging with the challenge of waste minimisation, in the face of ever growing volumes of waste. It is clear that SBC have begun to address these issues, but much remains to be done at the local, regional and national levels if a more sustainable approach to municipal waste policy and practice is to be achieved.

Annex A Waste Policy and SBC

A.1 Inside SBC

A diagrammatic representation of institutional relationships around SBC's MWP is presented as fig A1.

With its partner authorities in the Tees Valley, SBC's MWP is distinctive in the NE of England for its substantial dependence on the Energy from Waste (EfW) plant at Haverton Hill. Shortly before its abolition in 1996, Cleveland County Council (CCC) entered into a 25 year contract with SITA to supply minimum tonnages to the EfW plant and to landfill at Carlin Howe. The four successor authorities to CCC inherited this arrangement and today this central plank of SBC's waste management is handled jointly between the four authorities via a joint Waste Management Development Officer (WMDO). Part of the WMDO's role has been to develop a Joint Waste Management Strategy (JMWMS) for the four authorities (SBC 2002), which sought to provide a framework for joint action not only as regards the disposal of waste via the SITA contract jointly inherited from CCC but also on joint strategies for reducing, recycling and reusing waste.

As in many other local authorities, SBC waste management responsibilities have historically been located in a service department (now Service Stockton). Following a critical Best Value review of this service area in 2001 (AC 2002), amongst other key reforms, the decision was taken to separate the 'strategic', or policy, elements (under Waste and Fleet Services) from direct service provision (under Care For Your Area Service). More recently, following a further review by the Audit Commission of waste services in SBC (AC 2004), and in the light of feedback received through bidding for additional government funds, SBC has developed its own waste management strategy (SWMS) (SBC 2004a).

A.2 Waste arisings

Currently, waste arisings in Stockton are increasing by 5% a year (SBC 2004b), significantly above the national average, standing at 1.8% from 2001/02 to 2002/03, but below the trend in the North East which witnessed an increase of almost 7% increase between 2001/02 and 2002/03 (DEFRA 2004). In 2002/03, 83% of waste generated in Stockton was disposed of via the EfW plant, with 8.5% recycled or composted, and 8.4% sent to landfill (SBC 2004b).

A.3 Current initiatives

Following *Waste Strategy 2000* there was a growing realisation of the need to provide different forms of waste collection and disposal in order to comply with the targets set for SBC by central government in 2001 of 10% by 2003/04, 18% by 2005/06, and 30% by 2010/11. To this end, several schemes have been developed, including:

- In 2001, a new Household Waste Recycling Facility (HWRF) developed in partnership with Middlesbrough Borough Council and SITA
- An in-house kerb-side 'blue box' scheme, collecting glass, tin cans and paper, was rolled-out across the Borough in 2003-04.
- As part of this initiative, an education campaign based on the character 'Freda the Frog' was also launched, with her own website and membership club for children.
- In addition to promoting home composting, in 2003 SBC piloted a kerb-side collection of green waste. Its success coupled with a successful bid for funding to the third round of DEFRA's Waste Minimisation and Recycling (WMR) Fund in 2004 means this initiative will be extended to all households and establish a centralised green waste composting facility in the borough.
- In 2004, a successful bid to participate in a WRAP funded national project to explore effective promotion of home composting and to quantify the contribution of home composting to the diversion of biodegradable municipal waste (BMW) from landfill.

SBC's waste policy framework has been influenced by its role in the development of an Interreg project, *Making Waste Work*. The project, involving five European partners from the 'North Sea' region, focuses on the development and exchange of best practice among the partners in the areas of waste management systems, business and employment opportunities in the waste sector, and public education and awareness.

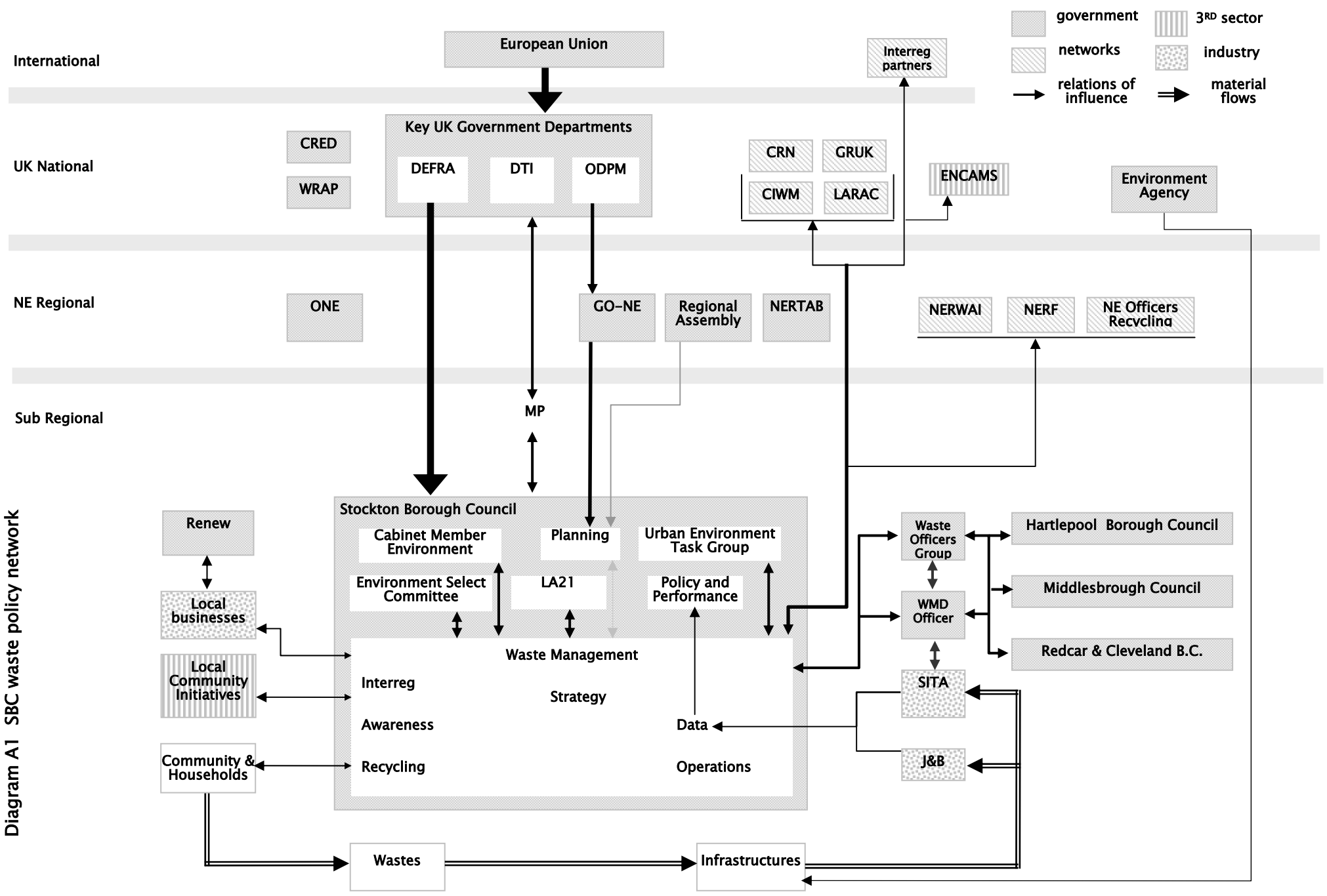


Diagram A1 SBC waste policy network

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