

Resources and Waste Targets Expert Group

Meeting readout – 13 November 2020

Attendees

Expert panellists: Paul Elkins (Chair), John Barrett, Margaret Bates, Raimund Bleischwitz, Frank Boons, Peter Hopkinson, Lucy O'Shea, Phil Purnell, Jacopo Torriti

Other attendees: 6 Defra group officials, WRAP

Introduction

The Resources and Waste Targets Expert Group (RWTEG) is a task-and-finish panel formed to provide Defra with independent evidence advice linked to long-term targets in the area of Resource Efficiency and Waste Reduction.

The Terms of Reference (ToR) have been provisionally agreed by panellists, though concern remains around generic lobbying clauses impacting rights to publish. It was agreed that academic publications would be unconstrained and that the reference is rather to more direct attempts to lobbying the Environment Bill. No interests relevant to the remit of the group were raised by members of the RWTEG.

Minutes will be published on a GOV.UK website from early 2021, which is welcomed by experts, and minutes to be recorded under Chatham House rules.

Key Decisions

Objective of meeting for Defra to ask RWTEG key questions around the methods for setting their targets and for group discussion on these issues:

A. Target: To reduce residual waste per capita (kg).

RWTEG asked for clarification on what Defra are using as the definition of residual waste.

1. If this is an environmental indicator, then the target should be to reduce residual waste (tonnes) rather than residual waste per capita (kg), but if population levels fall, then Defra shouldn't claim success. So, RWTEG suggested that both residual waste (tonnes) and residual waste per capita (kg) may need to be reported.
2. The consensus from RWTEG was that all waste sent to incineration/landfill should be included within the target scope rather than just municipal waste or all waste sent to landfill/incineration excluding major mineral waste. It was suggested it would be useful to break this waste down into sectors (e.g. household/municipal waste, construction, demolition and excavation (C, D & E) waste and commercial and industrial (C&I) waste).

- Municipal waste recognised to have a wide-ranging interpretation and not always the most helpful categorisation therefore.
 - When considering environmental impacts of wastes, important to also consider the upstream impacts of those materials too, not just the environmental impacts from treatment.
3. RWTEG agreed that, based on current data availability, a treatment-based approach (tonnages sent to landfill and incineration as opposed to tonnages collected kerbside or at HWRCs) is likely to be the best method for delivering a target against which progress can be measured.
- RWTEG agreed that the possibility of including waste exported for residual treatment within the target scope was worth further consideration to understand better any unintended consequences of their exclusion from the scope with possible unintended consequences of their inclusion.
 - Additional unintended consequences might be associated with ‘gaming’ the EWC and waste classification system through waste misclassification depending on the scope of the target, though the group noted targets are placed on government, with such issues to be considered as part of specific policy interventions in future.
4. Applying to both targets, interest in how to drive improvements across different actors/sectors through e.g. benchmarking or a combination of targets, can be used to drive outcomes more effectively.

RWTEG identified that a brief rationale around the residual waste target would be useful, along with how the two targets are linked together.

ACTION for Defra: It was suggested that Defra should write down their ideal indicator for this target if all data was available, as in the future there will be more data available than there is now.

ACTION for Defra: RWTEG suggested that Defra should look into the environmental impacts of particular EWC codes to determine priority sectors that could be focussed on. Some existing work already out there on this, including environmental impacts by material type.

B. Target: Increase resource productivity (potentially measured as national economic output e.g. GDP over Raw Material Consumption (RMC)).

Material denominator:

1. RWTEG expressed no immediate concerns with using a measure of material use (raw material consumption) calculated using an environmentally-extended multi-regional input-output (MRIO) method, however there would be further discussion regarding the proposed methodology after further considering requirements for indicators underpinning targets. The proposed methodology is underpinned by monetary data from Office for National Statistic (ONS) domestic supply and use

tables supplemented with additional data on how nations the UK trades with trade among themselves.

2. RWTEG had no immediate concerns with Defra's decision to aggregate the total material footprint based on mass (tonnages), but again would like as detailed a breakdown of this as possible. RWTEG agreed on using RMC over Raw Material Input (RMI), but would like more discussion on the material flows in RMC, particularly how they might be weighted to better understand environmental impact. Would like to see a target developed that ensured low tonnage but high impact materials e.g. hazardous chemicals, pesticides and heavy metals are not overlooked.
3. Defra proposed to exclude fossil fuels from the measure of material use for reasons that: a) fossil fuel use is the only element of the material footprint which has been trending downwards; b) fossil fuel use might be better managed in terms of climate impacts than their mass.
 - RWTEG did not raise issue with the decision to exclude fossil fuels, but again expressed an interest in as detailed of a material breakdown of RMC as possible, particularly highlighting elements in the low tonnage/high environmental impact classification.
4. Treatment of secondary materials within the indicator to be discussed further.

Economic numerator:

1. A key point of discussion was not only what economic numerator might be used to measure resource productivity, but also why to include one at all.
 - Raised that it can be important to have an indicator which reflects welfare as materials are mobilised and used and that resource productivity as a measure has significant traction behind it.
 - Raised that there is nevertheless a risk of a target being achieved through growth in the high value areas of the economy alone and there is a need to be mindful of the effect of the numerator.
 - Raised that an ideal way to conceptualise resource productivity is the 'Material Input per Service Unit' (MIPS) approach.
2. RWTEG agreed that there were a number of limitations to using an aggregate economic output indicator as a numerator for measuring resource productivity, but were in agreement that incorporating some sort of welfare/environmental indicator may have value.

ACTION for Defra: RWTEG suggested that Defra should take away four options to investigate further:

- Removing the economic numerator altogether
- Continue to use a measure of national economic output e.g. GDP, as the numerator

- Look for an alternative output measure for the numerator
- Use an environmental indicator in the denominator (CO₂ was suggested)

ACTION for RWTEG: Defra will take these options away to examine. Welcome any further suggestions from RWTEG of output indicators to look into further.

Next Steps

In the forthcoming meetings with RWTEG, Defra will seek feedback on baseline development and selecting policy options for further analysis against targets. The date and agenda of the next meeting to be agreed via correspondence.