

From Health and Safety concerns of Waste Workers towards a more Sustainable solution. Lessons from Copenhagen



Union members in Denmark in the middle 1990's campaigned and won the right for all "binmen" to become 'green ambassadors'. The chair of the union representing Copenhagen refuse collectors was worried about continuously running after rubbish trucks and dropping down dead around 55yrs old. So, the union – SID decided it would be better if they could slow the process and have the time and the skills to explain to householders how to minimise waste.

The union sought agreements with local authorities to pay for time off for training, and with the government to provide the development and educational materials. Both local and national government recognised the need to invest as a way of saving major future costs. All employees go off at an appropriate time for 2 – 3 weeks training. The training covers basic skills of numeracy and literacy as well as relevant laws, health and safety, and ways to give advice ("customer care"). This can include advice about which plastics go where, what may be valuable, how to set up composts – a whole range of newly developing areas of learning. There is always somebody from each depot on the training course, which is a way of everybody keeping up to date skills that may be transferable to other job situations.



The Danish trade union SID changed the job skills of rubbish collectors into "Green

ambassadors”. Posters advertising the new role could be seen on buses and other prominent areas, encouraging people to ask the new green ambassadors for advice.

These workers are in the best place to define and refine the waste streams, helping turn waste into a valuable resource. They can also help and educate people in the community, then you can see refuse collectors are well positioned. In Denmark, local residents were encouraged to raise environmental issues with them and refuse collectors and other community workers will need increased skills to respond. (See Annex Skills Set)

SID led the way in a sustainable waste strategy. They raised health and safety issues, protected the environment, saved money, and engaged socially, making this a classic study in sustainable development. They also implemented the EU Directive on Working Conditions restricting loads more than 11kg. And now, there are women refuse collectors where previously there were none¹.



Annex: Skills Development

It should be relatively easy to set up nationally recognised Vocationally Related Qualifications (VRQs) for these ambassadors. The sorts of learning and skills that would be required could be developed in relation to the [WAMITAB qualifications](#) for waste managers (level 4) and supervisors (level 3). Green Ambassadors would be level 2 - working under supervision.

Skills set

Some of the areas where competencies could be developed

- Communicate with householders

- What is waste

- Importance of waste minimisation (landfill issues)

- Explanation of waste hierarchy

- Explain different categories of waste (putricible, biodegradable, reusable, compostable, recyclable, ...)

- Which plastics go where (plastics is complex)?

- What is valuable (WEEE requirements?)

- How streaming minimises waste and enable reuse/recycling

- Alternatives to binning (charitable collections, etc)

Existing relevant VRQ.

Developing Environmental Awareness Level 2. Open College of North West Unit 3 Managing Waste Disposal. See [EPaW Guide to Waste Unit](#) of this VRQ.

Annex 2: Evidence of similar initiatives:

‘Green Ambassadors’ - although not for all binworkers in Newcastle..

http://www.sustainable-cities.org.uk/Database_files/BOBreport.pdf

& Swindon

http://www.thisisswindon.co.uk/display.var.1440106.0.get_ready_for_the_rubbish_revolution.php

ⁱ Meeting between Charlie Clutterbuck and Jesper Lund-Larsen H,S & E Coordinator General Workers Union in Denmark (SID) August 2001 For more details and latest developments: **United Federation of Danish Workers 3F**, Kampmannsgade 4, DK 1790 Copenhagen V , Denmark, Phone: +45 88 92 10 12,E-mail: jll@3f.dk, Website www.3f.dk