Policy Centre Jersey

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Website: www.policy.je
Email: info@policy.je

Think piece

Waste management

Jennifer Bridge

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Summary

- Jersey produces over twice the general waste per person than Guernsey does.
- Despite ten parishes offering kerbside recycling, many residents dispose of recyclables in general waste due to inconvenience or scepticism about whether materials are truly recycled.
- Jersey heavily relies on the La Collette Energy Recovery Facility (ERF), which incinerates waste to generate electricity. However, this

facility's need for waste potentially undermines reduction and recycling efforts.

- Guernsey has successfully reduced waste by a "Pay As You Throw" system for general waste, balanced by free kerbside recycling and food waste collection, incentivising diligent separation to minimise costs. It operates with a unified strategy, a single recycling organisation, and clear messaging.
- In 2023 the electricity produced from the ERF accounted for just 5% of Jersey's electricity but accounted for 14% of all carbon emissions.
- Jersey is at a crossroads, needing to decide whether to invest £250 million in a new ERF by 2035, when the current ERF reaches the end of its useful life, perpetuating the current system, or fundamentally rethink its relationship with resources, learning from Guernsey's example of political will, legislative frameworks, and economic incentives.

Waste doesn't vanish

A few weeks ago, while clearing out my garage, I binned some sun-brittled plastic clothes pegs, random bits of broken wood and old computer cables that had been chewed by one of my dachshunds. Mea culpa.

It seems I am not alone. Recently, I visited the Energy Recovery Facility to understand more about Jersey's waste management process. While watching the enormous mechanical claw grab rubbish for incineration, I couldn't help but notice the clinking sound of breaking glass and observe the sheer volume of potentially recyclable items - metal trays, clothing, cardboard - that had been thrown away.

The language we use matters. "Rubbish", "waste", "thrown away" - these words imply worthlessness, yet food scraps, plastic bottles, cardboard, glass and aluminium cans all hold significant value when reprocessed. Annie Leonard's phrase from “The Story of Stuff” (2007) remains prescient: "There's no such thing as ‘away’." Hearing this for the first time, I realised that I had never given much thought to waste. It really was out of sight and out of mind. This simple truth exposes the uncomfortable reality that our discards don't vanish; they persist, accumulate, pollute. As David Attenborough observed regarding plastic waste and microplastics in the food chain during Blue Planet II: "The plastics in our ocean ought never to have got there in the first place."

Jersey doesn't recycle

Our statistics reveal a troubling picture. Despite ten parishes offering kerbside recycling, Jersey produces over twice the general waste per person compared to neighbouring Guernsey. In 2024, Guernsey generated 118kg per capita of general household waste, while Jersey produced 348kg per capita. Does that surprise you?

Historically, Guernsey peaked at an impressive 73% recycling rate for household waste in 2019, settling at 68% in 2023, compared to Jersey's latest figure of 35%. These numbers expose two islands with fundamentally different approaches to waste management - and radically different outcomes.

The reality behind these figures is stark: significant numbers of Jersey residents are dumping recyclables in general waste. One young parent living in a parish without kerbside collections admitted: "We are pro-recycling, but adapting to life with a baby, it's the last thing we think about. Our nearest recycling centre is a drive away and perpetually overflowing with no room for our bits anyway. We dump way more than we'd like, but it's not convenient."

Another resident expressed broader concerns: "I'm for recycling, but I wish I felt more confident that all the stuff we recycle actually gets recycled and doesn't end up dumped anyway by unscrupulous operators." Both commentators express genuine desire to recycle – one awaits infrastructure, the other seeks reassurance about process integrity.

This scepticism emerged as a dominant theme in a Facebook poll I conducted to stimulate debate. Numerous respondents indicated they would increase recycling efforts if convinced their materials were actually being processed rather than discarded. One diligent recycler explained: "After hearing on Radio 4 that 91% of plastic in the UK is sent abroad and either burnt or dumped, damaging the environment in third world countries, it now goes to make electricity here." This response suggests we urgently need clearer messaging about recycling destinations and outcomes.

One point I hope is uncontentious is that we should reject and reduce plastic waste. Data from the UK environmental agency suggests that 30-40% of recycled plastic is sent abroad. The environmental damage caused by mismanaged exports in countries with weak infrastructure is well-documented, contributing to ocean pollution, microplastics, and health problems. The UK's reliance on exports reflects insufficient domestic recycling capacity, and while policies like the Environment Act 2021 aim to address this, implementation lags. Attenborough's work reinforces the urgency of tackling plastic waste globally, as it persists in the environment, harming ecosystems far beyond its origin.

Guernsey's experience

Guernsey's transformation offers compelling lessons. The island historically produced similar waste volumes to Jersey but faced crisis when its landfill approached capacity. Crucially, Guernsey twice rejected mass-burn incineration like Jersey's Energy Recovery Facility, forcing innovative

rethinking that created both economic and environmental imperatives for waste reduction.

Since 2019, they have ceased filling Mont Cuet landfill except for hazardous materials like asbestos, small amounts of materials which cannot be sent for energy recovery such as fibreglass and temporary food waste overflow during processing problems. Instead, they process general waste, food waste and glass as segregated streams at the Longue Hougue Waste Transfer Station. Recyclables, including paper, cardboard, plastics, metals and glass, are sorted locally then sent to UK or EU facilities, while residual waste undergoes energy recovery incineration in Scandinavia. Food waste becomes slurry for anaerobic digestion in the UK, producing biogas.

This system avoids local incineration emissions, though the 300-mile sea journey plus 100 miles overland transport adds to the carbon footprint. However, overall the carbon footprint is greatly reduced in comparison to landfill.

The results proved immediate and dramatic. In Guernsey's first year implementing their waste strategy, household waste dropped 11%, suggesting islanders made active choices to reject excess packaging, reduce consumption, reuse items, and repair rather than discard. This aligns with waste hierarchy principles - recycling should be considered a last resort after the four Rs of rejecting, reducing, reusing, and repairing, particularly when compared to local initiatives like Jersey Repair Café or reuse organisations including Durrell, Acorn, Jersey Hospice Shop and Rag Trade.

Guernsey's recycling success stems from three critical factors: overarching legislation directing parishes on waste collection, unified island-wide messaging, and, crucially, "Pay As You Throw" (PAYT) for general waste balanced by free kerbside recycling collection, encouraging diligent separation to minimise costs.

Guernsey operates with remarkable simplicity: one strategy, one recycling organisation, and an easily communicated system enabling residents to make environmentally responsible choices effortlessly. Jersey, by contrast, involves 13 different organisations in waste management. While ten of our 12 parishes provide kerbside recycling, they operate three slightly different systems. Grouville, having last debated kerbside recycling in 2021, awaits news from potential contractors. The Connétable of St Clement explained that once he secures company quotes, he will present proposals to the Parish Assembly.

Guernsey's PAYT system, launched in 2019, currently charges residents £1.88 for 50-litre general waste bags or £3.38 for 90-litre bags, plus a £112.97 standing charge per household, while recycling and food waste collections

remain free. Parishes levy additional per-household collection charges, and government charges for larger items - a double mattress costs £23.58, fridges £32.85, TVs £10.95. I imagine some readers bristle at these figures; for clarity, I'm not proposing this for Jersey at the moment.

Guernsey has fundamentally flipped the narrative: charging for waste you want to reduce while making kerbside recycling easy and free. The results speak volumes. Per capita general waste fell from 206kg in 2017 to around 118kg by 2023. Jersey's progress pales: our general waste dropped marginally from 358kg per capita in 2021 to 348kg in 2024. For transparency, methodologies differ slightly between islands - Jersey's figures reflect Parish deliveries to the Energy Recovery Facility from household collections and include some commercial-generated waste.

Guernsey's PAYT system wasn't universally popular initially. Resistance emerged from larger families concerned about bag pricing. St Peter Port, particularly the densely populated areas, experienced some compliance issues, resulting in uncollected bags and fly-tipping, resolved through enforcement. Their separate food waste collection, introduced in 2018, proved another victory, boosting recycling rates and nudging residents toward sustainable mindsets.

Jersey's approach

Jersey's approach leans heavily on La Collette Energy Recovery Facility (ERF), operational since 2011 with an anticipated 25-year lifespan. Processing up to 105,000 tonnes annually, it shrinks waste volume by 87% while generating electricity for up to 10,000 homes, keeping waste from landfill. Incinerator ash becomes aggregate products following UK treatment, reducing methane and leachate risks.

However, a fundamental contradiction exists: the plant requires waste to function, potentially undermining reduction and recycling priorities. The original ERF cost approximately £100 million with an anticipated 25-year lifespan; replacement costs are estimated at £250 million.

As an island importing significantly more goods than we export, return journey capacity exists for exporting recyclables - paper, cardboard, plastics, metals, glass and potentially food waste - to UK or EU facilities. presenting unexplored opportunities.

Our 2024-2030 strategy demonstrates intent but reveals the enormous gap requiring closure to match Guernsey's performance. Jersey's recycling rates desperately need acceleration to reduce environmental impact and align with global sustainability goals. The ERF's waste dependency creates confusing messaging about "feeding the beast", complicating reduction and recycling communications.

Furthermore, while most parishes operate kerbside recycling collections, they depend on parishioner goodwill with no penalties for disposing recyclables in regular bins - a voluntary system with predictably limited effectiveness.

The impact on carbon emissions

There is a related point. Jersey has adopted a Carbon Neutral Roadmap, with very ambitious targets to reduce emissions by 2030. However, Jersey is not on track to achieve these targets. It is correct that most of Jersey's electricity is imported from France, from nuclear and hydroelectric sources, and is therefore almost totally carbon-free. However, in 2023 electricity supply accounted for no less than 14% of Jersey's total emissions. This 14% was entirely the electricity produced from the ERF, but it accounted for just 5% of Jersey's electricity. By contrast, electricity supply accounts for 10% of emissions in the UK, notwithstanding the continued use of natural gas to generate electricity. Increased recycling is both desirable in its own right and vital in reducing emissions.

What needs to be done

Learning from Guernsey suggests clear pathways forward. A unified, island-wide kerbside recycling methodology would assist everyone, particularly those without vehicles, while reducing emissions from recycling centre trips. Guernsey has decommissioned all its Parish bring banks. Though PAYT might prove too radical for Jersey currently, evidence demonstrates that charging for general waste while keeping recycling free significantly alters behaviour patterns.

Rolling out food waste collections across all parishes could capture 35% of household waste, substantially changing behaviour while potentially extending ERF lifespan. In broader small-island waste management contexts, Guernsey stands out with exceptional recycling rates and low per capita waste generation. Comparative analysis with other small island jurisdictions proves problematic due to inconsistent data collection methodologies - Guernsey produces comprehensive annual reports while Jersey does not, and the Isle of Man publishes individual material recycling figures without island-wide rates.

Undeniably, Guernsey's success foundation is The Parochial Collection of Waste (Guernsey) Law, 2015, establishing legal frameworks for household waste collection and disposal across parishes. This legislation assigns responsibility to each parish's Douzaine for arranging regular collections, with primary purposes ensuring efficient, consistent waste management by empowering parishes to set reasonable waste quantity limits, while aligning with broader States waste management plans. The law provides enforcement powers addressing non-compliance, streamlining parish-level collection while supporting sustainable disposal practices.

With a ten-year lead in time considered appropriate for any major infrastructure project, we must consider now where we want to be in 2036: should we invest up to £250 million in a new Energy Recovery Facility, perpetuating our current trajectory, or fundamentally reimagine our relationship with resources.

In this context, it is perplexing to discover that there is no mention of the replacement ERF in the Government's new Capital Investment plan - *Investing in Jersey 2026 – 2050*. The executive summary of the report states that it: "sets out a long-term, coordinated plan for renewing and maintaining the Island's infrastructure and public assets. It provides a clear framework for investment in key areas such as housing, education, roads, utilities, coastal resilience, public buildings, and shared community spaces." Does the omission of a new ERF signify that the Government is considering a pivot to the Guernsey model or that this significant capital project has not been given appropriate priority?

Guernsey has demonstrated that small islands can achieve remarkable transformation through political will, comprehensive legislative frameworks, and economic incentives aligning environmental responsibility with behaviour change.

An ambitious scheme to reduce or even eliminate the burning of waste would contribute towards meeting Jersey's carbon reduction commitments. This would require a firm commitment to introduce the necessary measures to increase recycling.

Jersey stands at a crossroads where inaction will become a decision by default – one that commits us to a quarter-billion-pound investment.

The clock is ticking. The choice, and the time to make it, is now.

Biographical note

Jennifer Bridge MBE is an accomplished Chair with extensive experience across the creative arts, third sector, and political spheres.

Jennifer contributes regularly to public discourse through her columns and articles in local media, focusing on inclusion and open government.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, she completed postgraduate studies in research methodologies, which has enhanced her evidence-based approach to public commentary.

Jennifer is a co-organiser of Jersey repair café - a community group where volunteers fix broken items like clothes, electronics, and bikes for free, promoting sustainability and reducing waste.