

Visit to Viridor MRF, Ford, West Sussex 18 February

What a truly fascinating and informative visit this was. It revealed in detail what happens to the mixture of recyclable materials that one dumps in the kerb side household collection bins (or boxes – depends where you live). All was revealed, including learning a lovely new word, 'co-mingled', that cropped up frequently!

We were warmly welcomed by Fiona Bussell, Area Manager of Viridor Limited to the Materials Recycling Facility (MRF) which is located at Ford, West Sussex. Viridor have entered into a 25 year PFI contract with West Sussex County Council to achieve a 45% recycling rate for the County by 2015. Ford MRF is a critical factor and is proving its worth with currently a 40% rate being attained. The 2015 target seems readily achievable. Opened in July 2009, Ford MRF cost £15M and represents a major investment for Viridor. Although part of the establishment accommodates offices and the excellent Education Centre, the greater part of the building is engaged on operational work round the clock with operators performing, generally, 12 hour shifts.



Shifts operate from 0700 to 1700 when there is a 4 hour break to allow for regular maintenance and a thorough clean up of spilt materials and dust. Though in operation 24 hours a day (weekdays only), deliveries only currently take place during daylight hours to reduce the impact of vehicle movements on the local environment. Planning permission has been granted to allow this to be extended as well as weekend working.

With a system of modern inter-active white boards, access to live CCTV monitoring, Fiona took delegates through the process where large vehicles arrive at the site from waste transfer stations, to discharge materials into the receiving bay (a large warehouse type section of the building). A mechanical shovel then loads the materials into a hopper where the process of sorting starts by the use of 93 conveyor belts which, together with electronic devices, sorts the materials. The equipment can even detect clear plastic (drink bottles) and 'coloured' (normally liquid detergent bottles) and separate them in the process. Equally large magnets attract metals whereas 'reverse polarity' magnets (if that's the word) reject aluminium based materials into another section.

Though primarily automated the human factor was present with a small gang of operatives manning an initial access area where any obviously 'foreign' contaminants were removed together with large items (mainly large card board cartons) that might obstruct the system. An unenviable, but necessary task to ensure smooth working of the plant.

Suitably clad in PPE including safety helmets with incorporated ear defenders fitted with radio receivers, delegates were taken into the sorting area via a series of catwalks and stairs to the viewing platform when Fiona pointed out the various stages she had earlier described. Noisy (but hearing protected), slightly dusty the constant movement of conveyors, bits and pieces of paper, cartons etc. were seen to be undergoing the process. Fiona later advised that from reception at the centre it took about an hour for materials to end up baled up ready for onward movement to recycling/reprocessing companies. Though dusty and with odd bits of detritus falling off the belts, the site is thoroughly cleaned between shifts, where a two hour cleaning period is programmed



Returning to the Education Centre, Fiona fielded many questions from which it was evident that delegates had experienced recycling from an entirely different perspective. As Fiona explained, quite apart from achieving Government recycling targets, there were many other facets; efficiency by accepting that many 'throw away' items could be made into something useful; ground glass being part of highway surfacing materials being one example. In addition raw material was a finite source; recycling reduced this drain,

pollutants (CO2 and Methane) were reduced and the most practical aspect – landfill sites were nearly full with little provision on the same scale for the future.

The Ford MRF represents a massive investment for which there are rewards both ecological and financial. Revenue from materials sold on for reprocessing is proportionately shared between Viridor and WSCC – there can only be winners from contracts of this nature and it was very educational to see it operating 'up close and personal'.

We are very grateful to Viridor Limited for allowing this visit and particularly to Fiona Bussell for providing an extremely informative afternoon. We wish this exciting venture every success for the future.

More information can be obtained from www.recycleforwestsussex.org/ford_materials_recycling_facility