

# Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee

## Oral evidence: Plastic waste, HC 22

Tuesday 10 May 2022

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[Watch the meeting](#)

Members present: Geraint Davies (Chair); Kirsty Blackman; Rosie Duffield; Dr Neil Hudson; Robbie Moore; Mrs Sheryll Murray; Julian Sturdy; Derek Thomas.

Questions 314-394

### Witnesses

**I:** Jo Churchill MP, Minister for Agri-Innovation and Climate Adaptation, Chris Preston, Deputy Director, Resources and Waste, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, and Steve Molyneux, Deputy Director, Waste Regulation, Environment Agency.

Written evidence from witnesses:

– [The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs](#)



## Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Jo Churchill MP, Chris Preston and Steve Molyneux.

**Chair:** Good afternoon and welcome. I have great pleasure in formally opening this EFRA Committee meeting. I am Geraint Davies, the interim Chair, and I would like to invite our witnesses to introduce themselves, starting with Minister Jo Churchill.

**Jo Churchill:** Thank you very much, Chair. I am Jo Churchill, the DEFRA Minister for Agri-Innovation and Climate Adaptation.

**Chris Preston:** I am Chris Preston, the deputy director for resources and waste in DEFRA.

**Steve Molyneux:** I am Steve Molyneux, the deputy director in the Environment Agency in our regulated industry function, leading on waste regulation.

Q314 **Chair:** We'll kick straight off. Obviously, plastic waste is a massively important issue; and obviously, Minister, you know that extended producer responsibility for packaging is delayed until 2025. Does this mean that we are less likely to meet the 2025 target, which is, as you know, to ensure that all packaging put on the market is recyclable, compostable or reusable? Will we miss that target now?

**Jo Churchill:** Introducing EPR, as you know, moves the cost of dealing with packaging waste away from households, away from the taxpayer, and puts the responsibility fairly and squarely on those who produce items. When we went out to consultation, basically what producers were telling us was that there was insufficient time. We wished to introduce it in 2023; we are in fact introducing EPR in 2024, and it will be fully operational at that time. That also gave us the chance to ensure that the scheme administrator was there and that the system for reporting requirements and so on was up and fully functioning.

What does it mean? I think it means that we are still on—we believe that our targets are ambitious but that we are still on target.

Q315 **Chair:** On that target, is it the case that all plastic packaging put on the market will be recyclable, compostable or reusable by 2025? That won't happen, will it?

**Jo Churchill:** The Government's target was a combination of the objective in the 25-year environment plan and that then followed up in the Environment Act. It sets out quite clearly that we are aiming to eliminate all avoidable plastic waste by 2042, and there will be a step change to that point.

The difficulty with that question is, "What are you deeming plastic and what are you deeming packaging?", if you see what I mean, because it stretches right across just about every industry. Take, for example, food



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packaging—but there is also plastic packaging right across the piece. Therefore we have ambitions through EPR.

We are working towards 2025 in packaging, but actually this is a highly involved and complex area; it involves many different moving parts. So I would say we are working towards it in what we would probably all understand as packaging, but there will be areas that people bring up as packaging, whether it's in specialist areas or whatever, that we may need a little more time to work towards.

**Q316 Chair:** Do you think there should be a global target for all plastic production or consumption, which is reduced over time—a bit like with climate change and the overall amount of carbon? I know there are lots of different sorts of plastics and this is very complicated, as you have described, but do you think there should be an aggregate total, measured each year, that is decreasing and strategies should be applied to try to achieve that?

**Jo Churchill:** I think we are working towards that with the United Nations Environment Assembly proposal put forward by Rwanda and Peru in March this year, which we ourselves have signed up to along with—I think there were 12 countries in the room. It is working towards it.

The complexity is also involved in the fact that as we drive EPR and the deposit return scheme through, the point is that we build a recycling industry in this country that can cope—currently, and we will probably come on to this, we export some of our waste and so on—and that we have targets that we ourselves can make sure that we meet in-country. Then, having those international conversations and agreements, the £500 million into Blue Planet and so on and so forth—all these things—come as part of it. Our work with WRAP and the plastic pact also plays into that particular narrative.

**Q317 Chair:** So that people can understand what is happening—I have mentioned the global target, but in terms of actual rates of recycling, composting and reuse, because it is not clear that the target focuses on those—do you think that we should generate actual rates of recycling, composting and reuse that we can track over time, and exceed or not?

**Jo Churchill:** Some of the further changes and reforms that we are putting into the system—like digital waste tracking and some of the reforms there to enable us to see where our waste is going—will help us to target it more. For example, compostable waste is very difficult. There are some niche uses—some teabags, fruit labels and things like that—but if we are composting something, it is arguably a single-use item in the first place, so composting for me is difficult.

Through food waste collection, we will compost in that area, but we cannot just bring things to market and say that they are biodegradable, for example, because that is still a single-use plastic. You know as well as I do that some biodegradable products take such a long time to break down. At the moment, very interesting research is going on in this area, at various



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institutions. This week, I visited Portsmouth University, and I saw the amazing work that they are doing on plastic-eating enzymes and so on.

The important thing here, however, is that we recycle or we reduce where we can. That is what EPR is—we want to get people to use less, so reducing consumption, and to reuse items as much as we can, hence encouraging people to have bags that they use more than once. Then we come on to recycling. As it stands, we will consult on reuse targets by 2025, but we are very much in that work phase at the moment.

**Q318 Chair:** Brilliant. We will come on to composting, but you mentioned teabags. My understanding is that some teabags, like PG Tips, are decomposable, but that others, like Yorkshire Tea, have plastic in them. Is there a case for the consumer to be told, or to know through the labelling? Everyone thinks that a teabag will decompose, but some teabags do less than others.

**Jo Churchill:** So as not to pick on a particular teabag, I think that labelling per se is really important, as is having it simple, so just the swoosh. I bet we have all stood there in the kitchen and thought, “Hmmm, we can recycle it, can’t we?” So, just the swoosh to say that we can recycle it, or a swoosh with a line if we cannot, makes it much simpler for people.

**Chair:** Okay. Talking of swooshes, over to Sheryll Murray.

**Q319 Mrs Murray:** Welcome, Minister. By 2030, the Government want 62% of plastic packaging to be recycled. Why has that target been chosen when the National Infrastructure Commission recommended an overall rate of 75%? You just explained the difference between packaging and plastic—is that something to do with it or is there another explanation?

**Jo Churchill:** Essentially, that is what the pathway shows—that that is where we are going to get to. It is important that targets are realistic, and that is what we believe is a realistic target.

**Q320 Mrs Murray:** So you aspire to get to a higher rate, but that is what you think you will reach.

**Jo Churchill:** I believe—and Chris might help me—that it is higher than what we originally consulted on, is it not Chris?

**Chris Preston:** It is.

**Jo Churchill:** So we have been more ambitious than what we originally consulted on, which is pleasing, because the one thing we need in this area is ambition. Notwithstanding that, it is a target that we feel we can achieve.

**Q321 Mrs Murray:** Thank you. Moving on again, you have previously mentioned the 2042 target to eliminate avoidable waste. Do you agree that it is subjective and could be difficult to measure?

**Jo Churchill:** I think all these things are difficult to measure. There are over 1,000 different plastics. There are an awful lot of different definitions



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within the industry, and it is about making sure that we all know what we are talking about and that we are all working to the same targets on the same products. That is why we are developing an evaluation programme to make sure that we can understand where our problem plastics are, because part of this should be that we are designing those problem plastics out of circulation completely.

When I visit sites, which I do regularly—I have been to Southwark, Avonmouth and so on—very often they say it is the design of the product that causes them an enormous number of problems. You get different plastics mixing. You then cannot get the quality—for example, if you want to have it recycled for food grade and you get a contaminate in there, that is blown.

It is about making sure that we know where our difficulties are. We can get a cleaner waste scheme and track that waste scheme, and we will know what we are recycling. Then we can put it into a virtuous circle, because that is what we are aiming for at the end of the day—that circular economy.

**Q322 Mrs Murray:** Just for the record, could you define “we”? You said, “We are all working towards.” Who are “we”?

**Jo Churchill:** The Department.

**Q323 Mrs Murray:** Is it just the Department, or does it include other people as well, such as consumers or the businesses that create the plastic?

**Jo Churchill:** I think there are several within this. Basically, if you take it from the top down, you have your producers and your collection—your councils, how easy it is and so on, which is why our consistent collection reforms are looking at trying to assist people, to make sure that it is easier—and then you have behaviour change from people. We are all sat here with our bottles—that is behaviour change—but trying to fill them up on the estate is quite tricky, because you cannot necessarily get them underneath.

Many people now have a reusable bag, rather than a plastic bag, in their pocket or handbag, because obviously those reforms have now really begun to bed in. I am sure you have all seen it in your constituencies: people now take their own bags when shopping. It is nothing like it was, and we are beginning to see the results on the beaches in Cornwall and right across the country, because there are fewer bags in circulation. We did have 7.6 billion, and somewhere in the region of 7 billion have been taken out. I think there are something like 417 million in circulation.

**Mrs Murray:** Thank you very much.

**Q324 Chair:** On that, you will know that the reduction in the use of plastic bags was largely driven by the plastic bag tax. You also mention the issue of problem plastics—namely that there are lots of different sorts of plastics—and that, if there was a homogeneous or rationalised waste stream, it would be more cost-effective and profitable to recycle. Do you



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think there's a case for a differentiated tax approach, as it were, to encourage fewer types of easier-to-recycle plastic and more homogeneous packaging, rather than a huge swathe that makes it very costly and less effective?

**Jo Churchill:** I actually think we have that with our modulated fees approach, where, through a system of modulated fees, we can penalise that behaviour. Chris might explain how modulated fees work, if you'll let him in—he'll be a lot clearer than me. That's one of the incentives, along with the plastic packaging tax that came in this April and the fact that, last March, we doubled the cost of carrier bags to 10p and extended it across all retail outlets.

We are using both the stick and the carrot. We are using taxes or charges where that is appropriate. The benefit of the carrier bag tax, of course, is that it has provided £190 million for good causes. Perhaps you would allow Chris to explain the modulated fees.

Q325 **Chair:** Chris, if I am a producer, how are the Government going to not exactly force me but encourage me, rather, not to produce more and more different plastics that are difficult to recycle?

**Chris Preston:** The scheme administrator will look at the recyclability and, working with producers, put in place some recyclability criteria. The packaging formats that aren't easy to recycle will carry a higher fee—for not just plastic, but other types.

The chances are that if it's not recyclable, it's going to end up either in energy from waste or in your black bin, in landfill, which is more costly for whoever is disposing of that. That will have a higher fee. That will provide a direct financial incentive for producers to say, "I'm going to produce something that's dead easy to recycle." It will hit people in the pocket.

I want to say something about Sheryll's question, earlier. We have published a monitoring and evaluation plan, which is still a work in progress. It's definitely worth the Clerks having a look at that and providing some advice on their thoughts for the resource and waste strategy.

**Mrs Murray:** Thank you very much.

**Derek Thomas:** Hello, Minister. At the moment, we have the packaging recovery note, which big businesses have to do to demonstrate that some of the packaging has been recovered, and then we have the packaging export recovery notes.

**Jo Churchill:** PERNs, yes.

Q326 **Derek Thomas:** My understanding was that the extended producer responsibility would replace those, but I don't think that is now the plan. Can you explain the thinking behind that?

**Jo Churchill:** The plan is that it will do that, but we are still using the PERNs system in the short term. That is a compromise, essentially,



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because we need better digital tracking through the system. As all the other pieces of the jigsaw start to come in, we will have the ability to move over to what I consider a more streamlined solution. We are using an interim solution. We know that it works because, obviously, the Environment Agency uses it as part of its checks and balances to check that people are doing what they say they are doing.

**Q327 Derek Thomas:** Do you have any idea how long that transition or tapering will take? Have you got a vision of when we might get to the goal?

**Jo Churchill:** Somewhere in the region of three to four years. I suggest we will be looking at 2026.

**Q328 Derek Thomas:** Okay, great. Under the revised proposals, businesses with a £2 million turnover that handle 50 million tonnes of packaging a year will need to pay the fee. That seems to catch fewer businesses than first intended. Is that a fair observation?

**Jo Churchill:** Again, I think that was a result of the consultation, with regard to small businesses. We are trying to drive behaviour change—that is what all these measures are set up to do. The suite of different things we are putting together will make sure that we have the correct response. I see these very much coming in through the next five years.

By 2027, we will largely have the suite of measures, the electronic waste tracking and the carrier, broker and dealer legislation. Hopefully, we will have consistent collections. It is difficult as one or two of these consultations are due soon, but consistent collecting obviously plays a large part in this, as does how simple it is to pick up the waste, DRS and the collection of things like plastic film.

**Q329 Derek Thomas:** Earlier on, you were quite right to mention how plastic use in Cornwall, particularly plastic bags, has reduced dramatically. We used to see trees absolutely cluttered with plastic and we don't see that anymore, so that is a really good result, but that is a tax on plastic bags, effectively.

**Jo Churchill:** Yes.

**Q330 Derek Thomas:** What we seem to be seeing here is that there are fewer charges imposed on the producers than on individuals. You are saying that all the measures together still drive behaviour change in both individuals and businesses. Do you still feel confident about that?

**Jo Churchill:** I do because you have data reporting in there. One thing we will be doing is understanding how much plastic packaging enters the market. Some of our data is not as robust as I would like it to be. We need to know more about what is going on the market, where it is going, what we are doing with it and how much of that is being recycled and reused, and the reduction.

**Q331 Derek Thomas:** I completely applaud that, as I am a great fan of all these things, but will you have the wriggle room? When you have that



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data, if you are not seeing the kind of progress or improvement you expect and the behaviour change that we are talking about, have you got the wriggle room to tighten things up or to adjust what you are doing to drive the change you want?

**Jo Churchill:** I believe we have. That is why a lot of these things are iterative. For example, we had the bans on microplastics in body wash, straws and cotton buds. We have just consulted on the next iteration, which is plastic cutlery and a suite that included—I am going to get one of these wrong—balloon sticks, plastic plates, plastic cutlery— Was that it?

**Chris Preston:** Yes.

**Jo Churchill:** Right. The next one looks at wet wipes with plastic in them, sachets, which are a pest, and two other things—you might have to let my brain tick over. As you will have seen from the reports we get in from litter picks, we now have a reduction in straws and cotton buds, but the point is that something else goes into top place because there is still too much plastic out there in circulation. That is why our primary objective is to reduce consumption as well as improving downstream, by reusing and then recycling.

Q332 **Derek Thomas:** Can I quickly talk about microplastics? Again, that was a brilliant piece of legislation, but there was a news report this week that sewage processing companies are finding that the crumb at the end of the process that is spread on fields contains a lot of microplastics, because the system cannot sift it out. Do you think the measures you are proposing today will address that particular challenge? We are literally ploughing microplastics into our fields and they will obviously find their way into our Cornish waters.

**Jo Churchill:** Funnily enough, I spoke to one of the professors at Portsmouth about this. Measures in the Environment Act will help with that and some of the other issues we have been talking about, and will give us levers and the ability to set targets. I will hand to Chris because this is Minister Pow's area, because it sits with water and sewage, but it is a really interesting point. We were talking about filters on washing machines, but if somebody takes their filter and knocks it down the sink, what have you achieved? That is what I mean about it being really important; I am looking forward to reading your report. It is about that balance of changing producer behaviour, nudging consumer behaviour, and ensuring that we get to the right place. We are already seeing some washing machine manufacturers selling their products with an "Ooh, mine's got a filter!" type of thing. What I do not have any control over is what people are then doing with that microplastic. That is the tricky bit, because it is hard to legislate for that behaviour.

**Chris Preston:** I can also give the other things, which are sachets, wet wipes, tobacco filters, cups, and expanded polystyrene—apologies, my memory failed me as well.

In terms of microplastics, you have to come at it, exactly as the Minister said, from a range of different areas. No one measure will ever tackle





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microplastics getting into watercourses and the ocean. Something like 70% of all plastics that end up in the ocean start their life on land, and they work their way down through our rivers.

There must be a combination of different things. You need strong litter policies to stop people littering the plastics in the first place and you have to ensure that people have the right places to dispose of things. Those are the kind of unintentional microplastics and plastics, which nobody wants to end up in watercourses and the oceans.

However, you also have microplastics that are deliberately added. I think that policies like the Government's policy around microbeads are exactly right, because that is stopping a deliberately added thing right at the source. That is one of the things we are looking at more broadly in tackling the problem of microplastics, but no one-size-fits-all thing policy works in this area.

**Steve Molyneux:** One of the challenges around microplastics is that there has not been an agreed methodology for sampling or analysing for them. The Environment Agency is developing our laboratory capacity to be able to implement baseline surveillance monitoring for microplastics, and we are hoping that will start in 2023.

**Jo Churchill:** Lots and lots of work is going on in this area.

Q333 **Chair:** On microplastics, there was a UN report some time ago saying that by 2050 there would be more plastic in the sea by weight than fish. I do not know if anyone has any comments on that. My other question—because we have spoken about the ingestion of plastic—is whether there is any emerging evidence about the health impacts of eating plastics, through fish or whatever, or inhaling microplastics, perhaps in a flat when you are drying clothes, which are full of plastic, which you then breath in. What is the latest health evidence?

**Jo Churchill:** Again, when I was at Portsmouth this week, we spent quite a long time talking about the plastics in the home. They very often come off the carpet, because they often have a plastic component, and you are right that they come off the textiles, and so on. There is work to do. It is about having the right evidence base on which to start building the right policy base. We also have work under way with the FSA, who are looking into the contamination of microplastics through the food chain, and whether that has a detrimental effect on human health. At the moment, the FSA are saying that there is no detrimental effect, but I shouldn't think there is anybody, either in this room or without, who does not agree that we need to clean up our oceans.

The fact that they think that plastic pollution in the ocean will treble by 2040 is really quite staggering, and I think they reckon that, by 2050, the weight of plastic in our oceans will actually be more than the weight of fish. It is a very special part of our ecosystem, and that is why we are actually investing a lot of money, through Blue Planet, and various other



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programmes, to ensure we are doing the right work. I mean, you have an expert on that type of thing here.

**Q334 Mrs Murray:** This is just a plea, more than anything, Minister. When you define sachets, can you ensure it is a broad definition? People normally think a little sachet is the square plastic thing you get your ketchup or mayonnaise in, but it could include things like pet food containers, which can easily be substituted by foil or tin. This is just a plea, but can you ensure that it is the broadest definition, including the little pots that you get milk in, rather than just sachets, and things like that, because we must ensure that we capture as much plastic as we can.

**Jo Churchill:** We do, but we also need to ensure that we understand that it is a valuable resource—for example, for patients who unfortunately may need to use a colostomy bag or something like that. You need to understand that plastic also has some very beneficial properties. I think the whole of where we sit now is that we want to enhance the positive. Even with those positive elements, we want to ensure that those who produce them have the right methods of getting them recycled because, again, we have our objective on landfill and so on. We do not want things buried. Technically, we want a minimal amount burned. We want to be as careful with these resources as we can.

**Mrs Murray:** Thank you.

**Q335 Robbie Moore:** Before I ask my question, I want to put on the record that, while I do not, my family own and operate a plastic recycling business.

Going back to reduce and reuse under the EPR, Minister, despite the importance of reducing and reusing plastics, the revised EPR fees will no longer incentivise the use of reusable packaging, but there will be reuse and refill obligations. Could I explore that a bit further? What are these obligations, which are due by 2025, and what will they look like?

**Jo Churchill:** It is about how things fit into the waste hierarchy and, essentially, how packages can be reduced, changed or eliminated entirely. This is very prescient at the moment. We are working on it now to try to understand what the right way of proceeding in this area is. Chris, can I ask you?

**Chris Preston:** Reuse is the hardest bit of the system to get right. That is why we are planning to bring in some measures from 2025. The team at the moment are going all out to get EPR—the kind of stuff you have seen as part of our consultation response—up and running from 2024. We definitely want to include reuse in that process. That is not to say, technically, that reuse is not being considered at the moment.

In the current packaging regulations and in the EPR packaging regulations, if a producer puts something on the market and can then show that it has been reused—a good example is a glass milk bottle—they do not get charged twice for it, so there is a financial incentive. They will get charged the first time it goes on the market, because at some point it will end up



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as waste because it will get broken or damaged and cannot be used any more, so they need to pay the cost of dealing with it. They do not get charged again if they bring it back into the system and reuse it. Reuse is considered, but it is not considered as much as Ministers are pushing us to do—if I am honest.

**Jo Churchill:** On refill, we have some trials going on because refill is, again, an issue of behaviour change. It is also about shop redesign. It is about which products lend themselves to being refilled and how is the product then treated in store. If you think, “I need to refill my washing-up liquid”—because detergents and things like that are thought as being quite easy ones to do—but then you go to work and you have forgotten your bottles, if you need washing-up liquid or shampoo, you are going to purchase it, and then you start the cycle again with another product. You have all those variables in there.

Q336 **Robbie Moore:** Are the Government looking to commit to any material or packaging reduction targets as part of the obligations that are coming out?

**Jo Churchill:** Our targets will cover all materials. Can you be a bit more specific?

Q337 **Robbie Moore:** On reuse and refilling obligations, will there be a timeline set out with measurables and targets in place for ensuring there is enough need?

**Jo Churchill:** Potentially, you are thinking of the target that the French have announced—

**Robbie Moore:** Yes.

**Jo Churchill**—which is ambitious, but they shop in a very different way. That is why we are looking at it, and evaluating. We have work ongoing with Morrisons, Waitrose, Ocado and Lidl, amongst others, to make sure that we can optimise the refill in store. It is also about the square footage in store. Again, I feel like I am not giving you a definitive answer. We would like targets, but there are a lot of moving parts. We have a residual waste modulation target as well, which will also fit into that piece.

Q338 **Robbie Moore:** I wanted to explore the incentivisation of reuse and refill outside of EPR a bit further. What are the Government’s plans for universal packaging and more universal use of refilling and reusing different products? What are the Government’s plans further down the line to help users with that?

**Jo Churchill:** We are doing that work at the moment. It is a bit chicken and egg. Some of this is being driven by the industry. For example, where I shop, I noticed a couple of weeks ago that there are now white tops on my milk cartons. Sad as I am, I cheered—“Woo, look at that!”—because that helps us drive the quality; it is about being able to recycle a quality product and put it back into the system. So there are small changes coming unbidden, if you like, and I would like to drive those things as swiftly as possible.



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I hope to go and see a paint recycling system. You get paint in tins and a recyclable plastic, but it is the contents that are so hard to get rid of. It is about, as we extend EPR, making sure that we take these things into account. For example, you can take back small electrical goods—we have gone off packaging per se, but this is still a plastic item and I have to think about plastic as a family, if you see what I mean. From about 18 months ago, you can now take those small electrical items back to the shop for a swap. Some refills may work like that. For hygiene reasons or for some other reason, the container may need to be cleaned before it is refilled. Some of the individual consumer objections are around things like hygiene and practicality and that sort of thing. We just have to work through those with the consultations.

**Chris Preston:** Yes, that's right. Ministers have asked us to look at what a reduction target could look like by 2025. That work is starting now. I can't give you a definitive answer—that's a very civil-service answer, isn't it?

**Jo Churchill:** Like "soon" and "shortly".

**Chris Preston:** Yes, "soon" and "shortly" and "in due course". With modulated fees and the increasing fees that producers are going to pay to place packaging on the market under extended producer responsibility, there is a direct financial incentive for producers to reduce the amount of packaging. It is going to be linked to tonnages. So, if you place a smaller tonnage, your share of the overall fees is going to go down. There are incentives there as well.

**Jo Churchill:** There is also the incentive of, if we can drive the infrastructure and the recyclability, and drive more of it through, with the packaging tax, we have good quality recycled material to put into the packaging. As of April this year, 30% had to be recycled material, or else there is a charge of £200 per tonne of packaging. All those things marry together to start to give us those incentives.

Q339 **Robbie Moore:** One final question from me: is the Government doing any work with retailers or those involved in designing packaging to make products even easier to recycle? For example, paper is always the most challenging part to get out of a plastic product when you are recycling it. Trying to remove the paper labelling from the product is extremely expensive, in terms of energy and cost, as part of the recycling process. Is the Government doing anything to try to make the product, whether it is a bottle or something else, easier to be recycled?

**Jo Churchill:** Yes, we are. We are working with WRAP and on the plastics pact. We work with the Council for Sustainable Business as well, with them feeding ideas, and we have just been discussing some new projects with them to look at some of these exact areas. You need to know what works. Things can theoretically sound like they might be all right. For example—who knew?—bricks were starting to come wrapped on to site, with large amounts of single-use plastic, and they are now stopping that.



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We are raising the profile of single-use plastics and talking about how we can do things better. What it does is drive better product design and better understanding of the fact that we do not want stuff that we cannot recycle. This is a precious resource, not a waste item, and we need to look after these things. That drives the incentive to actually build the infrastructure so that, as you will know only too well, we have the right infrastructure to feed the system to make sure it becomes a nice circular economy. We have some way to go, and I would be the first to admit that. We also have some way to go on behaviour change when you look at littering and things like that, which are still a problem across many parts of the country.

**Robbie Moore:** Thank you.

Q340 **Chair:** Mr Moore mentioned retailers. I am wondering whether you think retailers could do more. Obviously, we have talked a bit about taxing producers, but if consumers took their packaging back to where they got it—Sainsbury's or whatever—that would put enormous pressure on retailers to put pressure on producers to produce less packaging. Maybe retailers should have more responsibility and more accountability, so that we get consumer pressure on retailers to put pressure on producers. What is the thinking about that?

**Jo Churchill:** Again, it is about plastics—such as our making sure that flexible plastic can be taken back in store. It will be kerbside by 2027, but at the moment you can take that back in store and recycle it with your carrier bags. I started my working life at a high street company that was very well known for refilling its products back in the day: Body Shop. You could take anything back; I can remember filling milk bottles. White Musk was a fragrance that just flew out of the door, but we put it into all sorts of things. Obviously, regulations change around hygiene and so on, but they still refill things.

Consumer pressure has a great role to play. You see people in the supermarket now taking their own containers. That should not be a huge problem, but not every customer will have the ability to do all these things all the time, so it is basically about having a bit of flex. I will often say, "Please don't put that plastic tub—you have just put a fitted lid on it—inside another plastic bag. Just stick the label on top of it." Consumers are incredibly powerful, and so are shareholders in wanting their companies to do better.

Q341 **Chair:** My understanding is that, in Germany, there is much more facility to go and refill your own boxes and this sort of thing—it is more set up for that. Is there any way that the Government can help retailers to bring forward their offer, so that it is more sustainable? I do not know whether Chris Preston has information on this.

**Jo Churchill:** I will ask Chris to come in. It is also about different infrastructures. In the '80s, I happened to be in Germany quite a lot, and the bins were already segregated for the different forms of recycling and so on. This is about the way that different systems are set up.



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**Chris Preston:** There are three areas that you have talked about. One is about supermarkets taking back their packaging. Some of the larger stores will now take it back, and we have seen a really big expansion—which from my perspective is really welcome—of local authorities taking back flexible plastic, such as bread bags and all those things that are really hard to recycle, as the Minister mentioned.

We talked a little earlier about design of packaging as well, and the plastics pact. The Government fund WRAP. WRAP has done a huge amount of work over the years to get packaging to a much more recyclable point. Black plastic packaging was a real problem a few years ago, but now that problem is becoming less and less of an issue.

The third point, which I have now forgotten—

**Chair:** Germany.

**Chris Preston:** Germany, that's right. In terms of encouraging supermarkets to make it easier for people to refill, we have seen a real sea change in that over the past four or five years. Apart from niche shops—there have always been some, and the Minister mentioned the Body Shop and I remember being able to refill stuff there—you see quite a lot more in the way of supermarkets trying to facilitate and help their consumers to make different choices. It is all about consumer choice, as the Minister said, and how powerful the consumer is in these things. Lidl has just introduced a refill system for its laundry detergent, so for its own brand, you can now take the bottle in and it will dispense laundry detergent for you. So, supermarkets are doing a lot of work in this area.

Could they do more? Probably. But we like to work through the plastics pact, which covers something like 70% of all brands that get placed on the market, and that is making a big difference. It is moving well towards its 2025 target for its members, to make packaging reusable, recyclable and compostable.

**Jo Churchill:** I think that the latest figures showed that they were somewhere in the order of 70% of everything—from WRAP, from those signed up to the plastics pact—is now recyclable or reusable.

**Chair:** Often, the frontline for consumers is the supermarkets, so that is a very visible pressure—

**Jo Churchill:** However, most of our high streets now have independent shops that are refill shops and, actually, you vote with your purse and with your feet.

Q342 **Chair:** May I ask about the issue of replacing plastics with lighter, thinner plastics, which can be harder to recycle? This is odd, it is sort of volume and weight-driven. Is there a sort of perverse problem here, that we might be switching towards lighter, less recyclable plastics?

**Jo Churchill:** Much of what the consultations are about is making sure that we have the correct information. You are right that, if you just swap



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something for something that is less recyclable or harder to recycle, you do not solve your problem. You just create a different problem. If you go around some of the waste facilities—I was at one in Southwark—you can see the lightweight plastic just winding its way around the machinery, rendering the machinery ineffective.

Essentially, it is about making sure that packaging is fit for purpose and that it is designed to do what it says. The film on the top of some food products also worries me. It is really difficult to get rid of and—as we will be taking away food waste from 2025—it breaks down into microplastics. Again, as far as getting rid of that end product is concerned, microplastics are pesky little things. They seem to pitch up everywhere.

**Q343 Chair:** Is there a way of having a tax regime that does not incentivise those lighter plastics that, as you described, are more difficult to recycle?

**Jo Churchill:** Through modulated fees, that is what we are doing. That will be the encouragement to do it. Some things are inherently more difficult to recycle. Extruded and expanded polystyrenes fall into that, because they are quite bulky but very light, and collection facilities are not uniform. It is a little like Mr Moore was saying about bonded items. Many of our packs perhaps have aluminium, paper, plastic, paper and then plastic again. That is really tricky to deal with, so it comes down to design.

**Q344 Chair:** Just by way of example, you can have a pizza that is in a cardboard box with a plastic, see-through window. When you take it out, it is wrapped in cellophane, and when you take that off, there is a polystyrene base. With all those bits and pieces of heterogeneous packaging, it's quite difficult. Is there a way of encouraging manufacturers to have more homogeneous packaging, which is more cost-effective to recycle?

**Jo Churchill:** There is a way. The best thing you can do to get rid of all that is—with respect, Mr Davies—to make your own pizza. It's not actually that tricky, and then you get rid of all those different items.

We want people to look at their product design. Is it really necessary to shrink-wrap a cucumber, for example, in single-use plastic packaging? You will get told it is for longevity, but actually we have some fantastic innovations coming through. We have the use of LED light, which helps prolong shelf life, and things like that. So we are at a point of enormous change.

Government needs to encourage. We need to build more recycling. There are 3,000 to 4,500 pent-up jobs waiting to be made in the recycling industry and, it is estimated, some £10 billion of investment to actually make a strong recycling industry in the UK. What we are aiming for is that product design and to make sure that we can track the product through its life cycle and that it does not end up with the enforcement agency having a challenge to deal with it.

**Q345 Chair:** Obviously, we are focusing on plastics. If you tax plastics, which we agree with, there is obviously a tendency for people to move to other



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packaging. Is there a case for taxing all packaging to try to reduce the overall amount of packaging, at the same time as differentially taxing plastic so that we hit plastic a bit harder? We want to get the overall packaging down, because of the waste and resource issues.

**Jo Churchill:** My belief is that modulation will do that, but I am also really, really keen not to fall into the unintended consequence that one type of packaging is much more virtuous than something else. You need the appropriate packaging for the right product. I am concerned about some moves to using different forms of packaging that are less easily recyclable. This is about making sure that there is an ability—we are doing this—to actually define recyclability and make sure that part of that definition is that something can be recycled. Very often, you get told something is recyclable, but then when you look at it, it is virtually impossible to find the place where you can recycle it. So it must be easily recyclable. This is about making sure that things like that are built through the system, because you can say something is recyclable, but how easy is it for you to recycle? That's what we want to deal with through consistency.

Q346 **Chair:** Exactly. On a similar point, in terms of the amount of recycled plastic in plastic—obviously, the tax is about the percentage of recycled plastic—there is a problem with measuring, in mixed plastic, how much of it is recycled, or is there? I don't know whether Steve or others have a view on how difficult that is. Obviously, manufacturers may try to get away with it, if I can put it like that.

**Jo Churchill:** We do have checks and balances. Chris?

**Chris Preston:** People will make a declaration about the plastic that they are placing on the market. This is not my area of expertise, by the way. This is within the Treasury's purview; I have to be very clear about that. HMRC have set out guidance for people to make a self-declaration and assessment to say, "I have placed x tonnes of plastic packaging on the market," or things that are classed as plastic packaging under the legislation that brought in the plastic packaging tax. Once you have made that declaration, you may get challenged in the way you always can be by the taxman, to make sure that you have the documentation or the proof in place to show that it contains 30% of recycled content. Remember: the idea behind the plastic packaging tax is to draw material through the system. We will help on one side with things like our consistency in collection, because we will now be collecting more material, but what the plastic packaging tax actually does is to create a market for some of that plastic, which in the past probably did not have a market. It will now. Does that answer your question?

Q347 **Chair:** Yes, I think so. There is a chemical question here. If you keep on recycling plastic, you often end up with dark brown plastic. It has been suggested that if you have a microwave curry, or any meal, that there is an issue of possible chemical leakage. Are there any health concerns about microwaving heavily recycled plastic?





**Jo Churchill:** That is why we have challenges. That is why we work closely with both the FSA and the universities. Obviously, this is an emerging area. The primary job is to ensure that a product is safe when it goes to market. You get a change in chemical composition as you recycle more and more times. Very often, the product becomes more brittle. But how much better it is that something is reused within the system or is recycled several times, because then you have only paid at the top end for that first use on a reused item or you have had the benefit of collecting it throughout.

At Avonmouth, for example, they have energy from waste and then they have a polymer plant next door. You see the different pelletised grades of plastic. Premium grade goes off to food. Other grades might become the bottles that we put washing liquid in; they transport the pellets up to Tyneside and they make your washing liquid bottles and so on. It is still a valuable resource. Different grades have different purposes.

Q348 **Chair:** We are at 30%. Is there a commitment from the Government to increase the percentage of recycled plastic, in terms of the tax, so that over time we use more and more recycled plastic and there is an incentive to do that?

**Jo Churchill:** That is HMT's decision at the end of the day.

Q349 **Chair:** Is that something that you would support?

**Jo Churchill:** As we build the infrastructure and we have more recycled product to feed into products, I can see a very logical step to increasing the encouragement. You have said the word "tax" on many occasions, Mr Davies, but I would rather see this as a financial encouragement, to make sure that companies do the right thing.

**Chair:** Exactly—a tax incentive. Precisely, and on the subject of the right thing, over to Neil Hudson.

Q350 **Dr Hudson:** Thank you, Chair. Thank you, Minister for being with us today, and thank you to your colleagues from DEFRA and the EA, Mr Molyneux and Mr Preston.

I wanted to come on to compostable packaging. You have touched on that in some of your previous answers, Minister. Compostable packaging appears in several of the Government targets and bio-based plastics are mentioned in the Government's innovation strategy. As you touched on, this is a rapidly evolving area. I have a firm in my constituency—Futamura in Wigton—that is on the leading edge in cellulose films and renewable and compostable packaging. There is a tension in the system with what the Government are doing. How do the Government plan to support compostable and bio-based plastic, while at the same time taxing them and making them liable to higher fees under the EPR? Do you see that tension? You touched on that in terms of how they are classified.

**Jo Churchill:** There is that tension. You have a rural constituency, don't you? One of the tensions with bio-based plastic, which may well prove useful but we need to do more research into, is whether the land use will

change. If you are growing a product for cellulose or the starch to make packaging, is that displacing crops that you might use for human consumption?

So you have the land use change, greenhouse gas emissions from the production of bio-based plastics and their end-of-life treatment, and changes in nutrient and water consumption from crop switching. It is never a zero-sum game. A wise man described it to me by saying, "Fossil fuel is very old plants and animals that have degraded into oil, but actually what you have with a bio-based plastic is the plant at a different point in its cycle." I think bio-based plastic may prove useful, but we still need more research.

Compostable is difficult. As I said, they may be useful for some of the niche applications, but they do not contribute to a circular economy, so it is difficult. They must be processed in industrial composting facilities, but we currently do not have the capacity for that in the UK. It is the problem of placing something on the market and saying it is recyclable or compostable, but then what do we actually do with it? If it just ends up going to incineration, or whatever, we have not really achieved what we want to achieve, which is to have a sensible system.

If individuals incorrectly put such things into the wrong bin, they can also have the effect of contamination and lead to lower quality recycling, which is also a problem for biodegradable plastics. This is one of the problems, because there is quite a lot going on and some of these terms are used interchangeably.

Biodegradable plastics do not have a role to play in the circular economy. There is no evidence that they consistently break down in the real world. They might well be a source of plastic and microplastic pollution, and we need to understand that better.

Q351 **Dr Hudson:** Thank you; that is helpful. A lot of the debate in the plastics world is about using the appropriate plastics, and about their appropriate use. If biodegradable and compostable plastic technology is developing—you have mentioned using them for certain purposes—how can we ensure that these novel types of plastic are used in the most appropriate circumstances? That might be, for example, using compostable plastics in products that are potentially food contaminated. That would be horses for courses, as they would be used in a setting that could make it easier for the consumer to handle and suitably dispose of such plastics.

**Jo Churchill:** Could you give me an example?

Q352 **Dr Hudson:** Coming back to the tensions in the system, we are looking at innovation in different types of products. You mentioned clinical contamination, but if we have food contamination, can we have it in a biodegradable product? The Chair made a point about a pizza with umpteen different types of non-recyclable things. Could you use some form of biodegradable or compostable materials in products that are then potentially contaminated with food, so that they can go in the green bin



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and go on to compost?

**Jo Churchill:** We are doing some work in this area.

**Dr Hudson:** It is a new area.

**Jo Churchill:** Yes, it is. It is our ambition that from 2025, food waste collection will be put into compostable or AD plants, but there is a concern about microplastics.

**Chris Preston:** At the moment, the infrastructure is not in place to take compostables. I want to be clear about what it says in the Government response on compostable plastics, rather than compostables more broadly. Until the infrastructure is in place, we are open to the idea that if the infrastructure improves and these things can be collected, and if they are the best solution for dealing with a particular item—you mentioned food waste, and one of the areas we think is a very useful application for compostable plastics is in teabags or fruit labels.

There are areas where we think it is useful, but there are other areas where we would like to focus on recycling those materials, because once they go into a composting plant, they are single use and they are gone. We want to try to focus on recycling those materials. An example might be a cup: you can recycle that cup or compost it. In terms of use, recycling is better because that material is being put back into a circular economy. But you are quite right that there are times when it can help with getting food-based biodegradables into composting.

Q353 **Dr Hudson:** Coming back to your point about examples, Minister, you mentioned that we could get better labelling and clear labelling, so that if you are in the kitchen, you can make an informed choice about something being composted or recycled.

**Jo Churchill:** We are doing work on labelling, because it is so important.

**Chair:** That is a bit of work you are doing now. We would be interested to hear in future from you on that.

Q354 **Robbie Moore:** This question focuses on life cycle assessments. We have heard that there is great variation in how life cycle assessments—obviously, they assess the impact of products—operate and how they are conducted, making them difficult to compare with one another. Is the Government planning on bringing out a consistent approach to how life cycle assessments will be carried out?

**Jo Churchill:** It is part of some of these knotty issues that we are dealing with at the moment. You have experience in this area, or certainly your family does. There is the balancing of life cycle, but also resource, input and all the other issues that come into play when you are trying to make decisions. Arguably, you are asking me for a hierarchy of the best products to use. I think it comes back to the fact that the challenge is that, for some of these things, what the best product might be depends on the application. That feels like a bit of a get-out answer. You might think



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there is something I should be challenging more, but we have looked at life cycles and it is difficult to do a comparison.

**Chris Preston:** There are standard assessments for life cycle assessments, so as long as you make sure that you are using the same life cycle assessment to compare different products, I think that works. I don't think there is one-size-fits-all for doing a life cycle assessment. If we were looking at a life cycle assessment of how you treat food waste at the end of its life, you might look at different parameters for what it is you want to achieve in terms of assessing how good a particular treatment route is for it. What is its ecotoxicity? What residues does it leave behind? What is its carbon impact?

It is about making sure you have an easily understandable and easily replicable life cycle assessment. The Minister has commissioned some work from us on life cycle comparisons between reusable and disposable nappies. We will publish some research on that, but it needs to be something that people can look at. It will not be the same thing for every single product; it will be a different life cycle assessment, and the things that you compare for that product will be different from what you would compare for packaging or for how you dispose of food waste. I am not quite sure that a "standard" is the right way, but there are standards that the industry use and that are used in science to make comparisons between different materials and different products.

**Jo Churchill:** I have seen nappies on the market that say they are recyclable.

Q355 **Robbie Moore:** I assume from what you have said that there is an ambition at the moment from the Government to create a national database around life cycle assessments, so that industry and businesses can use that data to better inform the decisions they make and the direction in which they drive product design or their own policies.

**Jo Churchill:** The work on the plastics pact and all the rest of it is a jigsaw, but we are ultimately trying to drive this. That is what the work on consistency is meant to do, and it is what DRS and so on are meant to do. That is what gives the industry the confidence that they need to invest. It also plays into the fact that we need products designed in a way that means they can go through the system. If they are not designed in that way—if they are using either a very difficult-to-recycle plastic or we cannot get them through the system—modulated fees come in as a way to enable us to tweak, to make sure we drive the good behaviour.

This is a little like building a timepiece. We want industry to have confidence. At the moment, we have capacity at just over 50%. We know that if we want to drive export waste down and so on, we need to build capacity in this country. That, and consistency, is part of the assurance that we want to give businesses, so they invest, because there are jobs. It is a resource; it is not waste. We don't want to burn it. We want to look after it. That is where we are driving to.



**Q356 Mrs Murray:** Minister, I would like to turn to the consultation the Government are doing on a digital waste tracking system to track plastic waste from the point at which it becomes waste. Is it possible that it could be designed to accommodate a more comprehensive product tracking system in the future—one that tracks items throughout their life cycle, beginning to end, so we can assess how long a product has been used before it becomes waste?

**Jo Churchill:** In essence, we are looking at product passports. I will probably have to go to Chris, but product passports are largely about being able to do what you have just asked about. We want to be able to make sure that we can track these things through. A digital product passport is about digitally storing information about a product throughout its life cycle. We are driving the product passport as part of reuse, recovery of materials and products at end of life.

We committed to the introduction of mandatory waste tracking in the resources and waste strategy back in 2018, which we are just about to refresh for '22 to '27. In that, we committed to having a comprehensive way to see what is happening to the waste produced in the UK. It will help businesses comply with their duty of care as regards waste. It will help us move to a circular economy by maximising the value of the resources. It will also provide decision makers with the information they need to make more informed choices about waste policy and infrastructure. You may wish to ask Steve a question on this, but it reduces the ability of criminals—Sir James Bevan, head of the Environment Agency, said waste crime was like the narcotics industry. There is a lot of it about it. Digital tracking will give us the ability to really drive that down.

**Q357 Mrs Murray:** Before we move to Chris and Steve, do you think digital tracking data can be made as transparent as possible, so that people can understand it?

**Jo Churchill:** Through the Environment Act, which we passed in November last year, we took strong powers and we could introduce, if we wanted to, requirements for product passports for specified products. My only note of caution is that it isn't a silver bullet. No one-size policy fits all. It is important to understand what you are trying to get from the information and what you want the information to do. Maybe you would like to hear what we hope digital waste tracking will help with, from the Environment Agency.

**Mrs Murray:** Yes, please.

**Steve Molyneux:** We run an intelligence-based model for how we deal with regulation, especially how we deal with responding to waste crime or potential waste crime. Digital waste tracking is an initiative that we absolutely fully support and that the Government are fully engaged in developing. I think it is welcomed by industry, as you have probably heard from previous representations to and witnesses at the Committee. It brings us into the 21st century. We are going away from a paper-based system. It allows us real-time intelligence on where waste is going, and on



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how it is flowing within the country and outside to exports. It will not be a silver bullet to tackle waste crime, but it will be a huge and welcome tool in our armoury.

**Chris Preston:** On digital passports for packaging, it is an interesting one. I have not actually thought about that in the context of packaging in the past, because we hope to get to a point where packaging—because it has a short life, by its very nature—can be labelled to say, “Recycle” or “Don’t recycle”. Therefore, we have the systems in place, so we don’t need a product passport. Where product passports are incredibly useful are for things like that that are going to go around for a while—you don’t know what is in there, so a product passport will really help. Then it plays to the plastics and things like that that are in here. Bearing in mind that the Minister said at the start that our target for about 2042 is all avoidable plastics, not just packaging, understanding what has happened with those will be really important.

**Jo Churchill:** It also helps deter greenwashing. In something like your mobile phone or your laptop, you have 17 critical resources, so if you extract the nickel, the cobalt and so on, that also helps, particularly when there are tensions in the supply chain.

**Mrs Murray:** As someone who took the Deep Sea Mining Act 2014 through Parliament, I know a lot about rare earth metals. Anything that we can do to save those is a good idea.

Q358 **Chair:** On product passports, a lot of these products have bits and pieces that come from outside the UK—the EU and beyond—so are we working with the EU, for example, on a collaborative approach to product passports, so that we can track things that are partially made here, there and everywhere?

**Chris Preston:** We are watching what is happening in Europe. At the moment, they have published their proposals and their thoughts. I think they are thinking about things like batteries, and more around electrical equipment. I cannot remember all the products they have chosen to include. We will certainly look at what is happening in Europe with product passports.

**Jo Churchill:** Chair, are you alluding to ecodesign for sustainable products?

Q359 **Chair:** Partly, but more generally as well. It seems to me that if we are innovating here, we could share best practice, and if they are innovating there, we could take stuff off the shelf and work together. That would mean that if there are products that go between the EU and Britain, which traditionally there have been, we can track them together. Is that happening?

**Jo Churchill:** We have conversations, just as we do with the devolved nations, because there are similar issues there. Some of the items that we are looking at—electric vehicles, wind turbines and other things, doing some of the passport tracking—will need us to find a sensible approach. In



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a different area of my portfolio, just this week I asked to talk to the European Minister. If we can learn from each other, it is all well and good—or, indeed, beyond Europe, because others also have good recycling ecosystems across the world.

Q360 **Chair:** Steve, from your point of view as a regulator, is there an opportunity here to work with the EU to track products and jointly reduce the amount of plastic?

**Steve Molyneux:** From the Environment Agency's perspective, it would not be something that we would have responsibility or accountability for, but we would certainly welcome the more that can be done to develop products that reduce the amount of waste that is put on to the market. That is something we would absolutely encourage and support, but it would not be our responsibility as a regulator.

**Jo Churchill:** We have got a project under way. The Government—through DEFRA's £60 million contribution to the smart sustainable plastic packaging challenge, which was the largest amount given for such a challenge across Government—have awarded £175,000 to explore future packaging solutions, including one project using a digital passport. I am hoping that when we have that information back, we will be able to think about what the next step is.

**Chair:** Thank you. Over to Julian Sturdy.

Q361 **Julian Sturdy:** Minister, there has obviously already been a lot of talk about designing a better system, but if we want to design a better system, that will require investment, and some significant investment. So the question really is, how will the Government drive that required investment into mechanical, organic and chemical recycling so that we can process all types of plastic entering the market? Obviously, we know that significantly different types of plastic are entering the market.

**Jo Churchill:** There are, and across the piece there are these different technologies, at different levels. For example, we have projects going in four chemical recycling areas at the moment. But there is still some uncertainty surrounding chemical recycling and so on. The information I have is that industry—who I have spoken to, as you would expect, at some length—are keen to invest, and that there is something of the order of £10 billion waiting to be invested, to drive—

Q362 **Julian Sturdy:** Is that private investment?

**Jo Churchill:** That's private investment, yes.

We will be consulting later this year on stopping exports to non-OECD countries. As you drive lower consumption, better recycling and more reusability within the UK, what you want to do is drive towards less exports per se, and to do that you need to make sure that you have that system here. The estimate is that that will drive between 3,000 and 4,300 jobs in the industry.



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As I say, I have visited a lot of facilities. Actually, it is a really quite exciting industry. There is lots and lots of innovation in this space, making sure that we are designing the right products for the future. The Government is stimulating that, both through tax and through our work with WRAP and universities, making sure that we get the answers on what is, in essence, the recycling infrastructure and that we have that capacity. The capacity gap is seen to be about 350 kilotonnes at the moment.

**Q363 Julian Sturdy:** So, in those conversations that you have had with those companies, what have they come back saying?

**Jo Churchill:** They want certainty. They're businesses.

**Julian Sturdy:** I was going to say that. So how will the Government deliver that certainty for those companies? Are we talking longer contracts? How will that be delivered, because obviously that investment has to come over a longer period of time and they need that payback?

**Jo Churchill:** Part of that is driven through things like consistency, through DRS and through the consistent collections that we will bring in, hopefully in short order, so that people have the surety that there is enough product there to put into the system. It's a little like BEIS at the moment—there is a crossover to our Department—which is looking at anaerobic digestion. If our ambition is to make sure that we digest or compost all food waste, you again need the infrastructure there. Again, from discussions with that industry, it is clear that there are several billion pounds-worth of investment waiting to go into that. The assurance that you are collecting food waste every week and that it will be across the entire country gives investors the assurance that they will have the raw material to put into the system. Similarly, with the plastic packaging tax, you need the raw material. Therefore, you drive the infrastructure.

Beyond that, it is probably a question for—arguably—BEIS and the Treasury. If you are asking me about incentives, I would rather see us design the system to drive the incentives, because we want to recycle more. We want to stop exporting, in the course of time, but you can only do that if you can deal with the products in the here and now.

For example, we export an enormous tonnage of textiles for reuse and recycling. That market is potentially there, but you need the assurance of the products. That is what we are, hopefully, giving in the way we are designing this.

**Q364 Julian Sturdy:** Okay. Following up on that, what about the funds raised via the plastic packaging tax? Is there any talk that that might go to support investment in recycling facilities?

**Jo Churchill:** That is not, in all honesty, a conversation I have had. I would not tell you I had had it if I hadn't, and I have not had that conversation. You've made me think. Chris, perhaps you have a little more information? My defence would be that it's very new—we only brought it in in April—so we don't know what it's generating as yet.





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**Chris Preston:** When the then Chancellor announced it, it said in a Budget footnote that some of the money would be used to improve recycling and tackle litter. You've seen investment of nearly £300 million in capital infrastructure for food waste in the spending review—you could argue that it was part of that. It's all part of the broader Government mix. It is not hypothecated.

Q365 **Julian Sturdy:** So, you would argue that we won't really see whether it is being used for any kind of investment for 12 months.

**Chris Preston:** It is not hypothecated, which I guess is your question, really.

Q366 **Julian Sturdy:** I suggest, Chair, that this is something the Committee should revisit at some point, to see whether that investment is coming back or is just being kept in the Treasury. I know that the Minister probably can't answer that.

**Jo Churchill:** Obviously, if you wished to ask the Treasury those questions, that would be a Committee decision. I'm sure that would be very interesting.

**Chris Preston:** On infrastructure, the Minister has made the point about giving certainty for industry to invest. The Minister has had conversations with industry, and I speak to industry a lot, with regular discussions around what we need to do. We want to build infrastructure in the UK; we want domestic recycling capacity. I think some of the decisions we have taken, such as our extended producer responsibility reforms, will give industry that certainty. We are giving long-term targets, out to 2030 at least, which means people know that that legislation and the requirement to collect that material will be in place. EPR will drive one of the largest injections of resources into local authority budgets, through the fees from producers, in a long time. We are providing that certainty.

One of the questions is about giving longer-term contracts. The industry has talked to me about whether local authorities can give, say, an eight-year contract rather than a five-year contract. That is also something for local authorities to think about now that they have that certainty. We are also creating certainty for local government to make those longer-term investments.

Q367 **Julian Sturdy:** Last question, Chair. When you talk to those businesses, are some opting out, or not coming to the marketplace, because those contracts are too short?

**Jo Churchill:** That is a difficult question to answer, because all of them have different trajectories of investment that they decide on. You are dealing with some—

Q368 **Julian Sturdy:** So none has come back to you and said that they are not going to invest, because the contracts are too short?

**Jo Churchill:** No, contracts within local authorities are often more of a problem, and it's more the opposite—that you are contracted for a very



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long time. That's a slight chicken and egg situation, because they are very often contracted to somebody for the disposal of waste, and the larger company needs that because of the high capital investment. I have had a lot of positive conversations around the fact that our policies are beginning to drive consistency and a keenness to invest.

I don't know if the Committee is visiting any of the waste facilities during this inquiry, but there really are some phenomenal ones out there. I am keen to get that investment, because emissions and so on from some of the older facilities are not good. They are, obviously, permitted by the Environment Agency. There are many more things—you and I have often spoken about air quality, Mr Davies. We need to make sure that we are getting stuff out of landfill and stopping methane. Driving that certainty is, arguably, what we are doing for the industry.

**Q369 Chair:** That is very helpful. Obviously, I think we all share the idea that we should use the tax system to try to push down the amount of plastic and use investment to increase recycling, whether or not it is directly hypothecated, to get that mix right.

**Jo Churchill:** I have had conversations with Her Majesty's Treasury more specifically around individual areas, such as the deposit return scheme.

**Q370 Chair:** Right. We will go on to Dr Neil Hudson, but there is nothing glaring that you have not yet mentioned about the tax and incentives to drive forward recycling and beat down the amount of plastic being used, is there? Chris Preston, you have mentioned the timeframes of local authorities. Is there anything else we should be considering?

**Chris Preston:** I don't think so. I think we have probably covered the main things that we think will drive the sustainable use of plastics. As the Minister said at the start, we should not demonise plastic in this process. Plastic is amazing material, but it is about ensuring that it is used in the right places and in the right ways.

**Jo Churchill:** It's about its management, isn't it, really, rather than anything else?

**Q371 Dr Hudson:** Minister, it is very apparent from your answers, and from the discussion today, that the Government are actively weighing up the pros and cons and the costs and benefits of the different ways of tackling plastic waste. I want to move the line of questioning on to a specific type of recycling—chemical recycling. Has the Government done an assessment of how chemical recycling might, in some way, tackle hard-to-recycle and low-value plastics, and potentially prevent the incineration of plastic waste?

**Jo Churchill:** Excuse me—I am just going to my notes on chemical recycling. It does offer a complementary route to mechanical recycling, where that is uneconomic or impractical. That is where we would propose its use. Data that WRAP have analysed for us suggests that about 10.4%—or around 43 kilotonnes—of plastic that is processed is non-target



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or non-recyclable, but it could be chemically recycled. So it is about balancing the system.

Before we endorse fully chemical recycling, we really must understand the wider environmental impacts, including from emissions and residual outputs. We must really convince ourselves that chemical recycling will not divert material that could be potentially mechanically recycled, which would be better.

Q372 **Dr Hudson:** On that, do you have any preliminary assessment? As a Committee, we have heard criticisms about the energy and environmental impacts of chemical recycling. Do you have an initial response as to what you feel the impact of this type of recycling is, or is it that you are waiting to collect more evidence?

**Jo Churchill:** I asked for a teach-in on it, because I think it is a tricky area. It is a trade-off area. It resorts back to the fossil fuel, and then allows you to build it and recycle again, but at what cost? I just think we need to understand it better. That is my personal opinion, as a Minister, when I am looking at this, because I do not think there is the clarity I would want in order to make a decision.

**Chris Preston:** It is down to that life cycle assessment as well. It is high-energy, so as we decarbonise the network that will obviously make a difference with energy consumption and carbon emissions. It does deal with some stuff that is hard to recycle. The Government have invested money in projects around chemical recycling, to test it and trial it, but it is new so, as with any new technology, the Government will take a step back and look at the impacts and the benefits. The industry are incredibly keen on it, and there are some plastics that generally end up getting put into energy from waste or being landfilled but that could potentially go to chemical recycling, so it has potential.

Q373 **Dr Hudson:** So it's got potential—I guess the jury is out at the moment. Can you give us, as a Committee, any idea of a timeframe where the Government might come to a position on that?

**Chris Preston:** There are some projects that are being funded by UKRI.

**Jo Churchill:** Yes, there are four altogether, but three are ready to go. That evaluation time is, one would imagine, two years.

**Chris Preston:** Yes, two years.

Q374 **Dr Hudson:** Thank you; that is helpful. I guess the follow-up question, if a decision is being formulated about that particular methodology, is what else the Government can do to ensure that hard-to-recycle plastics are steered away from incineration or landfill? What else is in your weaponry to divert plastics away from that.

**Jo Churchill:** It comes back to some of the earlier conversations we had. You have the modulated fees and things, but why is it hard to recycle? Last week, I was told that we have over 1,000 plastics. We must be able to look at which ones are more easily recyclable, and then it goes back to



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the product design and using the most appropriate ones for the most appropriate job. The suite of measures that we have introduced incentivise companies to look at their packaging. You will have noticed yourself—I certainly have—that we now get four cans wrapped in a cardboard sleeve, like the old days, because you can put cardboard in the recycling and you do not have to worry about where the film goes. Now, if you buy a birthday card, it is very often not in a plastic sleeve, for example.

To your earlier point about retailers, I think this is about consumer pressure but, from conversations I have had, it is clear that many organisations are also seeing the direction of travel, whether it is Government-incentivised, consumer-incentivised or about the broader conversation that I am sure we all have with schoolchildren, our own families and so on. The drive is to make sure that we are moving in that direction. We are just trying to do that in a measured way so that we get the infrastructure and get it right, because it is tricky.

**Q375 Chair:** Incineration has been raised and as you know, Minister, I am concerned about burning things, air pollution and the like. There are issues with ultra-fine particulates getting through even the much more sophisticated filters. At the moment, local authorities have a tax on landfill. We want to do more recycling and not a great deal more incineration, so do you think there may be an opportunity for some sort of incineration tax to encourage more recycling and less incineration?

**Jo Churchill:** We are looking at the UK emissions trading scheme as part of this. We are calling for evidence to explore whether the UK scheme—we were instrumental in setting up the European model, so we have a lot of a priori knowledge—should be expanded to cover waste incineration and energy from waste. We are calling for evidence on that at the moment. Steve, do you have any comments on emissions?

**Steve Molyneux:** I think the main problem with a tax on waste to energy is the potential unintended consequence of driving more waste to landfill. The Committee has probably heard from industry, which probably has similar concerns about the potential tax implications. I think consultation is the right way to go in terms of gathering all the views.

**Q376 Chair:** Just anecdotally, Minister, I know that in Swansea, they recycle something like 62% of their waste. In north London, it is around 30%, and there is a move there to have a very significant and sophisticated incinerator for 700,000 tonnes of waste per year. It seems to me that if they could double the amount of recycling, they could halve the amount they intended to burn. Could there be further incentives for recycling and further disincentives—formerly known as taxes—for incineration? Do you have a view on whether we should look at that again? You have just mentioned the trading scheme, which is welcome.

**Jo Churchill:** One of the challenges of recycling in London is the demographic and the housing—it is much harder to recycle out of flats. I know that Wales has some very good rates of recycling. We had the conversation only today about how we can challenge ourselves to do



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better in flats. Cities across the globe can do it, and I think we need to look at driving up rates right across England. Obviously, the devolved nations are doing that job as well. One of the challenges is the number of people and the different ways they live, the amount of flats and so on. It is vexing some councils, with food waste, and arguably consistency as well, driving those rates up.

**Q377 Chair:** You have explained very well today that your focus is on reducing plastic waste, trying to combat air quality problems and so on, but my understanding is that BEIS, which obviously is not your Department, has granted a large number of planning consents for new incinerators that may mean, for London and elsewhere, an increasing amount of incineration over time. There may be a problem that once you have invested in an incinerator, someone else does one next door and you were not planning for that to happen, and the business model means you have to keep feeding more plastic waste. I am wondering whether that is a conversation you are having with BEIS. What can we do about that?

**Jo Churchill:** Chris regularly talks to colleagues across Government. Part of the tricky thing with this is that it also plays into DLUHC's remit, with the collection and so on. I think one of the particular energy from waste plants you refer to is being replaced due to its age. I would like to ask Steve, if you will indulge me, to talk about why we replace them and the quality of emissions that we get off new plants compared with old plants, because you do have to keep investing in them.

**Steve Molyneux:** Emissions standards for modern energy from waste plants are a world away from what may be in the public's consciousness in terms of what were deemed incinerators in the 1970s. They are very strictly regulated by the EA under environmental permitting regulations, and there are very strict emissions standards that any site must meet. They are constantly invested in to make sure that industry meets those standards.

**Q378 Chair:** It is very welcome that we close down less efficient incinerators and replace them with more efficient, healthier ones. The issue is whether the overall capacity is growing.

**Jo Churchill:** Chris can probably answer on capacity. Again, it is something to do with balance. We want to draw waste out of landfill. There needs to be a balanced ecosystem. We are looking to do a lot of different things in the waste space. Chris, can you answer the capacity question?

**Chris Preston:** We are looking to publish a waste infrastructure road map later this year, which will help us assess what capacity we need in order to deliver the recycling rates that we want to achieve, but also to look at the broader range of waste infrastructure that we have in England. Obviously, waste is a devolved matter, but we work with and talk to devolved Administration colleagues.

We are really keen that waste treatment facilities lower down the waste hierarchy—energy from waste and landfill—do not drive waste away from



being recycled or reduced in the first place. We are really clear about that. We recognise that some local authorities have longer-term contracts with facilities, so we will talk to local authorities. We are talking to energy from waste companies as well about that situation, certainly in terms of our consistency and collections work.

**Jo Churchill:** That is a key investment and also part of the other thing that is challenging us and we are looking at: the residues that come out of energy from waste, AD plants or anything else. They still contain a degree of contaminant and so on, and we have to understand how we get rid of those as well.

Q379 **Rosie Duffield:** What role should the Government play in helping producers and the waste management sector co-ordinate so that no products that cannot be sustainably disposed of enter the market?

**Chris Preston:** The Minister has already mentioned it, but it is things like modulated fees, working with—for all products or just for packaging? All products is trickier, perhaps.

**Rosie Duffield:** I suppose whatever you feel like answering. It's just overall, isn't it?

**Chris Preston:** For all products overall, we have plans to tackle various different product ranges, from waste electricals to wanting to look at textiles. We are thinking about a whole range of different product groups, but our most advanced plans are certainly around packaging. There will be a really strong role for our scheme administrator, working with producers to say whether products are easy to recycle when they are placed on the market. That is one of the core themes—objectives—of the system, so that all our packaging is reusable, compostable or recyclable by 2025, but we definitely want to focus on reduction and reuse.

Q380 **Rosie Duffield:** Isn't it a bit misleading, though, at the moment? For example, you might get something at home that you think says "recyclable" but you might have bought it in France and it cannot be recycled here or something like that. It is not always that straightforward, is it?

**Jo Churchill:** No, but that comes back to the points I was making about labelling and not greenwashing, and about people not being told by a producer that something is recyclable when it is not, and what that actually means. As Chris said, we are doing some work on nappies as well. If something is only recyclable in one plant in one obscure place, that is not really in the spirit of what we are driving towards here.

Part of our objective is that ease of recycling. That is what we are driving towards, and you have got the design, the EPR and the take-back schemes. I mentioned a scheme for small electrical goods. There are countries across the world that take mattresses back. We are starting to have those conversations. Lithium batteries are a pain because they set fire to the recycling plants, so making sure—*[Interruption.]* Yes, and to the refuse carts as well. It is a real pain for people who are building



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multimillion-pound facilities when they get a battery or whatever else in. In my sights, I have—

**Chris Preston:** Lots of things.

**Jo Churchill:** Yes, lots of things—sorry, Chris. I have batteries and electric vehicles in my sights. After a fashion, most things have a degree of plastic in them. There is also labelling them properly, understanding where they can be recycled, making it easy—that is why we are moving to having consistency on kerbside collections—and then beginning to work up things like film, which is difficult to recycle at the moment. If you can put something kerbside, it is so much easier.

Q381 **Rosie Duffield:** Are the Government considering legislative measures to rationalise the number of plastics used in products?

**Jo Churchill:** No, but I am interested in it. There are countries across the world looking at those that are poorest to recycle. There is definitely a piece—it is arguably an international piece—on this, where we can look to those products that are the most difficult to recycle. If you go to your household recycling centre or any large recycling plant, you will see a dump bin of things that just cannot be dealt with. That comes back to many of the other things we have discussed this afternoon, such as understanding what your products are made of and so on. That is why we are building this profile.

Q382 **Kirsty Blackman:** I will ask a number of questions on exports, but before I do, I want to thank you for mentioning textiles. I am concerned that that is not being considered enough given the large amount of plastics in quite a lot of the clothing that we wear. The other thing that has not been mentioned—maybe I missed it—is kids' toys. You can go into pound shops and buy a whole heap of kids' plastic toys for not very much money, and they are impossible to recycle because they are made with four different plastics. That is something that I just flag as a concern.

On exports, I am specifically thinking about how much plastic is exported. It is great to have the infrastructure here, but if we are still exporting lots and lots of stuff, that is still a big problem. Is there ever going to be a point where the UK gets to zero plastic waste being exported? Is that the Government's intention?

**Jo Churchill:** The Government's intention is to reduce what we are sending. One of the challenges is that of 519 kilotonnes—that was the last data that I had—I think 131 kilotonnes went to Turkey, which is probably our largest market. It comes back to—perhaps Steve and Chris will talk to this—tracking it, because the waste should be for recycling. The majority of it goes to 10 countries across Europe. We have conversations with those countries to make sure that their reforms and standards are baked into ours. We must make sure that we do not have what we have all seen in the press where waste is dumped, and that largely comes down to enforcement, digital tracking, and understanding what we have sent. We must ensure that it has been recycled. We need that loop so we know what comes back. That is what we are aiming for.



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**Steve Molyneux:** It is important to recognise that under international agreements plastic waste can be exported legally for recovery and reprocessing. You heard the Minister and Chris talk about the Government's ambition to reduce reliance on exports. That is something we would certainly support from a regulatory perspective. We support the coming consultation on banning plastic waste exports to OECD countries. As a regulator, we would definitely like to see less reliance on plastic waste exports and more inward investment in the UK to be able to recover our own and invest in our own economy.

Q383 **Kirsty Blackman:** I have a few more questions on that. The Government committed in their 2019 manifesto to ban exports to non-OECD countries. We understand that work is ongoing on that, but the last solid thing that I can see is that in January 2020 there was confirmation that that will happen. What is happening with that? Are we going to hear about that soon, or have I just missed it?

**Jo Churchill:** Yes. We are having a consultation, which will be out by the end of this year, won't it, Chris?

**Chris Preston:** It will.

**Jo Churchill:** There you go. You heard it here.

Q384 **Kirsty Blackman:** That's brilliant. My next question was specifically around that issue. You mentioned Turkey, and I am glad you did, because that is a significant portion of the exports, and it is an OECD country; it is not among the ones that are going to be covered by the ban. Have you considered extending the ban to countries such as Turkey that we export a huge amount of plastic waste to? Has that been under consideration at all?

**Jo Churchill:** At the moment, no. It is something we would like to move towards, but Turkey has a well-developed recycling industry that derives income for its economy from others sending waste there. The problem comes when inappropriate waste is sent, or it is dealt with inappropriately elsewhere. The same goes for textiles, arguably, because we have also seen the challenges there. The Environment Agency does enforce. For example, last year a waste management company was fined £1.5 million, was it not?

**Steve Molyneux:** It was £1.3 million.

**Jo Churchill:** It was fined £1.3 million for the inappropriate export of waste. The big problem hinges on what we were talking about earlier: we do not yet have the ability to recycle within country. If we have a total ban, what happens to that waste? We do not want it to go to landfill. We are not keen on driving incineration up. We are still looking at chemical. This is where this is tricky. I would agree with the aspiration, but part of that is where we started—reducing consumption has to be part of it as well. Is it really necessary for Mr Davies's pizza to come with all those various component parts? Could it not just come in a cardboard box?





**Q385 Kirsty Blackman:** On your point about the aspiration, there is a chicken and egg here. We can't get the recycling provision in the UK if the Government do not intend to have stuff for them to recycle—if we continue to say we are going to export lots of stuff. If there is a direction of travel, it means there is more likely to be the investment. I am glad to hear that the Government are working on the non-OECD stuff.

I know Steve wants to come in, but lastly, have you considered banning mixed exports—things that are more than one type of plastic? I understand that those are some of the things that are more likely to end up not getting recycled or not being treated appropriately. How does extended producer responsibility work if we cannot effectively manage and look at how another country is dealing with the waste that is being exported to it? How can we say that our producers are fulfilling their duties, or that the UK is fulfilling its duties, if we cannot track that effectively as it leaves the UK and goes elsewhere?

**Jo Churchill:** We are thinking about all those options. Much of what you have articulated are things that are testing us. What the Environment Agency is looking for, largely, is non-compliance. We need to get that sorted and we need to get digital waste tracking and we need to make sure of the carriers, brokers and dealers, and that PERNs are actually honest, up until the point that we change over, but then we also have to be building the in-country capacity to enable us to do it. We have a shortfall of somewhere around 450 kilotonnes. Everything we stop exporting, we need to deal with. The line is going up like that. That speaks to Mr Sturdy's point that that is where you can see the demand coming. If you are not sending it elsewhere, the products are dealt with in-country.

To your textiles point, that is where labelling will come in. We are beginning to see this on fashion items. I have spoken to the fashion industry, and they are looking at whether they can take things back, remake them, redesign them and then sell them back to the customer. It is an old-fashioned dressmaker type of approach. They are also looking at their component parts. When I get something with a label that says "recycled material", I would like to know how much recycled material is in it. It is very good to have some recycled material, but is it just a button on an outfit? It comes down to making sure that honesty becomes part of this.

**Steve Molyneux:** I will pick up a couple of points. On Turkey, we have talked previously about how we take an intelligence and risk-based approach to our enforcement work around waste and waste crime. We have seen a steady increase in exports to Turkey. Last year, an estimated 131,000 tonnes of plastic packaging waste was exported from the UK to Turkey. Turkey is the No. 1 destination for plastic packaging waste out of the UK.

As a consequence, we have been working very closely with the Turkish authorities—the competent authority over there is the Ministry of Environment, Urbanisation and Climate Change—to understand the details of their reprocessing sites and the concerns that they have, and to work



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together collectively on making sure that we are focusing on the sites in the UK that may be of concern.

Last January, we established an internal taskforce to focus on UK waste exports to Turkey. We focused on the top 10 responsible exporters, which deal with about 70% of the UK's waste packaging exports to Turkey, to make sure that we focus on compliance work, on the reprocessors and the exporters. That is targeted on where we think the highest risk is, so that we can then suspend or cancel accreditations if we believe it's not being dealt with correctly.

Also, on the back of working with the Turkish authorities, as they tighten up their controls we can make sure that that is built into the accreditations process that we go through, so that we won't accredit people who are not meeting the requirements of the Turkish authorities. So we are very much focused on Turkey at the moment in terms of export.

We welcome the fact that, as part of the consultation on banning plastic waste exportation to non-OECD countries, the Government may be looking at how we focus on tightening up green-list exports. That could include things like requiring green-list exports to be registered, technical competence around that, or proof of recycling in destination states. We think there is the opportunity for the Government consultation to look at how we may bring more of the green list under tighter control.

**Q386 Chair:** On this, we have, as you probably know, taken specific evidence from Greenpeace, by way of example, that basically catalogued enormous amounts of indiscriminate dumping and burning of UK plastic waste in Turkey, causing massive problems in terms of local human health, and animal health problems. We know about this; this is our waste.

What justification is there to continue to export waste to Turkey? I appreciate, Minister, you said, "Oh, well, we would have to recycle it," but we are creating it; surely we should deal with it.

**Jo Churchill:** No, there is a legitimate system for us to use other countries—to use their reliable infrastructure. What we need to do is ensure the enforcement and stopping of that waste that is then dealt with by unscrupulous individuals in other countries.

This is about us acting together, as a global nation, because our waste isn't somebody else's responsibility. But for some products, it may be that certain countries have a better system for dealing with waste. And there is a crossover in making sure we have that capacity. Turkey has a well regulated, legitimate waste industry that we are engaged with. That is not the problem.

**Q387 Chair:** Did you see the witness statements we had on this issue from Greenpeace and others? Obviously, some of the waste is properly treated, but there are very significant amounts of environmental damage occurring in Turkey because of our waste—because we are not treating it here.



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**Jo Churchill:** No, I didn't see that; I will look at it. And I will commit to writing to you with comments on what—any further information that we may have on it. Chris?

**Chris Preston:** I was just going to add some bits in. Waste criminals exist in Turkey, Poland, Germany and the UK, but there are also lots and lots of legitimate people who operate within the business. And waste is an international commodity. We export significant amounts of it. Not all of it is exported illegally or dealt with improperly when it reaches its end destination.

But we also recognise, and Government recognises, that Ministers have asked officials to look at options about how you can close down some of those loopholes where those waste criminals are able to operate in that space. One of the things we want to do is this. Previous Environmental Audit Committee hearings looked at PERNs, where you can issue waste export notes and get money for—to prove that it has been recycled.

One of the loopholes that we want to close down is this. We want to make sure that whichever destination our packaging waste, where someone is claiming a PERN, goes to has to provide proof that recycling has actually happened. That will also provide a level playing field for our domestic reprocessors, who have to provide proof that recycling has happened before they can receive their cash from producers. So there are areas where Government has recognised that the system needs to change, and the Government is putting in place measures to change the system to close down those loopholes.

Q388 **Chair:** Obviously, this is a global, international issue, but we should—

**Jo Churchill:** That is why we are working internationally. We mentioned earlier in this evidence session the UN Environment Assembly work that we are doing with Rwanda and Peru. Similarly, there is the Textiles 2030 work we are doing with WRAP and the fact that we can bring EPR into play, through the Environment Act, on textiles—to your earlier question—should we wish to.

Q389 **Chair:** Are the UK Government committed to showing leadership by pushing for legally binding targets on plastic reduction in the UN Environment Assembly global plastics treaty?

**Jo Churchill:** The UNEA treaty is being led by Rwanda and Peru. We are engaged in discussions with them and other consultees at this time.

Q390 **Chair:** I know that they are taking the lead, but is our position to push for legally binding targets on plastic reduction?

**Jo Churchill:** Not at this time. We are keen to see ambition in this space. That particular issue is being led by Rwanda and Peru, but it is not the only thing. We have also had conversations in the G7 and various other forums to ensure that we act globally, because we have to be mindful of the unintended consequences when we set targets.

Q391 **Chair:** We talked about subcontracting some of our plastic recycling and



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processing. Are the Government committed to providing financial and technical assistance to developing countries to help them to reduce their plastic consumption? Obviously we are not exporting to those countries, but are we generally providing assistance?

**Jo Churchill:** We already do that under GPAP. We are providing some partner countries across the world with financial assistance, help to build infrastructure and guidance on the best way of dealing with waste.

Q392 **Kirsty Blackman:** On the UNEA and the UK Government's priorities in that regard, obviously we are not leading UNEA, but there is a seat at the table and involvement. It would be really helpful if you could get in touch with the Committee later to outline your main calls and what you are pushing for; it is going to be important, so it would be good to know your key priorities.

**Jo Churchill:** It sits in Lord Goldsmith's portfolio. I will certainly let you have that information. I know that he is keen to be ambitious, because we have had conversations about it.

Q393 **Chair:** I know that there are high-level references to plastic waste reduction in the Australia and New Zealand deals. Is the plan for the Government to agree specific measures to reduce trade in plastic in future trade agreements?

**Jo Churchill:** You mentioned the Australia and New Zealand free trade agreements. We are at the early stages there. It was positive to see it there—Chris, would you agree?

**Chris Preston:** Yes.

**Jo Churchill:** It is work in progress.

Q394 **Chair:** Will the Government be looking to write into future trade agreements compliance with multilateral agreements such as the Basel convention and the UNEA treaty? Are we going to continue to show leadership in this trade space, which is obviously a major engine for plastic production?

**Jo Churchill:** Obviously Basel also covers chemicals and so on. If my memory serves me right, we are.

**Chair:** Okay. We will draw the sitting to a close. It has been a great pleasure to talk rubbish together. Thank you so much for your time. It has been valuable. We look forward to hearing from you, and giving you some support and making our recommendations. Thank you all.

**Jo Churchill:** I look forward to the report. Thank you for having us. It has been most enjoyable to be your rubbish friend this afternoon.