

Public Accounts Committee

Oral evidence: The Government's resources and waste reforms for England, HC 1755

Monday 11 September 2023

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Members present: Dame Meg Hillier (Chair); Mr Jonathan Djanogly; Mrs Flick Drummond; Mr Mark Francois; Ben Lake.

Gareth Davies, Comptroller and Auditor General, Keith Davis, Director, National Audit Office, and David Fairbrother, Treasury Officer of Accounts, were in attendance.

Questions 1-73

Witnesses

I: Tamara Finkelstein CB, Permanent Secretary, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs; Sarah Homer, Director General, Portfolio Delivery, DEFRA; Emma Bourne OBE, Director, Resources and Waste, DEFRA.



Report by the Comptroller and Auditor General

The Government's resources and waste reforms for England
(HC 1513, Session 2022-23)

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Emma Bourne, Tamara Finkelstein and Sarah Homer.

Q1 **Chair:** Welcome back to the Public Accounts Committee on Monday 11 September 2023. We are now moving into what was originally our advertised session for today, which is looking at the Government's resources and waste reforms in England. In 2018, the Government introduced their strategy for improving rates of recycling and reducing waste. We are now more than four years on from the publication of that strategy. Unfortunately, implementation of the reforms has been severely delayed, with England missing its legislative target to recycle 50% of household waste by 2020. The NAO has produced a useful Report on this issue, and we are going to talk to our witnesses about why progress has been slow and what can be done to improve matters.

I welcome our witnesses. Tamara Finkelstein, the permanent secretary at the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, is joined by her colleagues from the Department. Sarah Homer is the director general for portfolio delivery, and Emma Bourne, who is a first-time witness at the Committee, is the director for resources and waste. A warm welcome to you all. Just before we go into the main session, Ms Finkelstein, do you have any buildings with RAAC for which your Department has overall responsibility?

Tamara Finkelstein: We have been doing a full look at all our buildings. We have 505 relevant buildings to look at, including outbuildings and that sort of thing. We have gone through 85% of those at stage 1, and found 43 buildings that we want to have a further look at. We need more information on 15% of them, mainly where they have landlords from whom we need more information. There are only two buildings where we have had to take some action to not use certain parts of them, so we have done that, then with the ones where we have found RAAC we are going to the next stage. We are doing that under the guidance of the Institution of Structural Engineers. I know that the Committee has a lot of interest in our Weybridge buildings. We have done a whole stage 1 survey on them. There are 144 buildings and 19 of them are among the 43, so we will be going to the next stage of looking at those buildings.

Q2 **Chair:** How are you finding getting surveyors, given that the Department for Education now has eight surveyors' firms on its books?

Tamara Finkelstein: We have our own set of buildings people.

Chair: A clever move by somebody—



Tamara Finkelstein: And we have contracts to be able to look at that.

Q3 **Chair:** So that is not a problem—you are able to get through them?

Tamara Finkelstein: We are certainly able to look at the stage 1 desktop and public information.

Q4 **Chair:** Are any of these buildings mission critical? If there is a bit of closure, what is the impact on DEFRA's work?

Tamara Finkelstein: We need to look at that. I have not been made aware that we have a worry about a building that will be critical.

Q5 **Chair:** Okay, so for Weybridge—

Tamara Finkelstein: We will look at the 19 at Weybridge.

Q6 **Chair:** You are looking at 19?

Tamara Finkelstein: Nineteen out of the 144 at Weybridge. A lot of those do not have people actively in them a lot of the time. They are some of our depots, farm buildings and so on. I am pretty confident from what I understand that we would be able to mitigate these without huge impact.

Q7 **Chair:** We will leave that there because we could talk about RAAC forever, but I think that we have all had enough of that for today.

I want to move on to the main issue. This was a complex set of reforms, which you were planning to introduce to kerbside collections and packaging regulations, yet a lot of, or all of, the success of this relied on understanding consumer behaviour and how consumers would change their behaviour. Why did you go ahead with the plans—or start laying out the plans—without really understanding that behavioural side of it?

Tamara Finkelstein: I don't think that we did go ahead without understanding behaviours. We started in 2018 with the resources and waste strategy and then started building out the programme. A set of reforms—the extended producer responsibility, our deposit return scheme and consistent collection—is at the heart of a lot of the change, and that is very much grounded in what we understand about consumer behaviour. Each of those drew on the consumer-behaviour information that we have.

For example, we invest in WRAP—the Waste and Resources Action Programme—which has a recycling tracker that has been going since 2004. It gives us a lot of information about why people do not recycle—as you have seen, the recycling rates have plateaued and that is when people don't understand whether something is recyclable or not—and it identifies particular segments of the population that do less recycling than others. We have then used that to shape both our reforms and some of our activity. Food Waste Action Week this year was designed to target segment sevens, who are loosely busy, rushed families with kids, because they are particularly—

Q8 **Chair:** Sorry, what is the phrase?



Tamara Finkelstein: They have basically done a segmentation, and this is segment seven. Based on demographics, outlook and values and consumption patterns, they have identified different segments. The particular one that the Food Waste Action Week was aimed at was those busy families with young children, because we could see that they had less likelihood of recycling. Therefore, all the activity on that week was aimed at trying to get that group to recycle. A lot of our activities are very driven by behaviour-change evidence.

Q9 Mr Djanogly: We have received a significant number of submissions on this hearing, and some key themes have been coming out: significant delays on the implementation, that those delays from DEFRA on implementation are leading to a lack of clarity for the sectors, and that the lack of an overall plan from DEFRA and across Government is also leading to delays and problems.

The momentum for the implementation of reforms seems to have slowed down, but it is not just a question of timing; it seems increasingly to be about a lack of coherence on what is actually to be delivered. Ms Finkelstein, how can local authorities, for instance, be expected to develop their waste-management programmes when they don't have adequate guidance coming from the top on what they should be doing?

Tamara Finkelstein: Shall I start with the point about delays? I absolutely recognise that, and the Report brings out some of the delays. I would say that some of them are due to external factors that have been challenging to manage.

When covid hit, this was an area that had less resource put on it as we moved resource on to other areas. That was in part because businesses and local authorities also were focused elsewhere, and we very much need to—as you suggest in the second half of your question—co-create with them.

We have had a lot of political change, and the issue with that is trying to get cross-Government agreement because, as you say, it is really important that it is a cross-Government plan. That has led to some delays. We are taking some sort of deliberate delay at this point, given the kind of economic context and concern about the additional burden of some measures on cost of living.

The Report talks about ways in which we could have set ourselves up better as a programme, and we have learned from that and developed that. There were some external and internal factors that have caused some of those delays. I very much recognise the need for businesses and local authorities to have a good understanding of what we are doing and to co-create it with us. There is the set of reforms that I just described on collection and packaging, and at the end of July we put out the next chapter in our waste prevention programme—that is, the other areas in which we will be taking action.

I do think there is a comprehensive vision and plan, but what local authorities and businesses need is the detail. We have moved to give them



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some of that detail, including much more on the extended producer responsibility, and there is more to come. We have done quite an extensive reset of the programme and have involved them in co-creating what those timelines will look like. I might bring in Ms Bourne to say a little about that reset and how we have been giving more of that comprehensive information to both local authorities and businesses.

Emma Bourne: Happy to do so. I think we would describe our approach to engaging with both local authorities and businesses in terms of three key elements: we consulted extensively on the policy; we continue to communicate how that policy is being implemented and translated into delivery, but we are also co-designing the detail of that implementation. That final leg of the approach to engaging with businesses and local authorities is really at the heart of how we are resetting the programme as well. In doing that, we are working very closely with colleagues in the Department for Levelling Up in our engagement with local authorities in England and with the devolved Administrations with regard to local authorities across the other nations.

In that reset, we are looking at a number of elements, but stakeholder feedback is absolutely at the core of how we design it. We are looking at how we put together the overarching story of what these reforms are designed to achieve and how we work not only with industry and local government, but with the wider waste and resources value chain to realise that. We are looking at how we ensure our plans and approach are set up to succeed, so testing the realism of the lead-in times to develop various aspects, looking for aspects and elements where industry and local authorities can play a greater role themselves, and continuously refining that.

Three elements of where that comes into practice at the moment are that we are consulting on the main SI for the extended producer responsibility scheme on its operability and clarity; we are initiating a co-design process to design the scheme administrator for extended producer responsibility, of which local authorities will be a key part; and we are setting up a steering group, which will oversee that implementation longer term—again, with local authorities as part of that group.

Q10 Mr Djanogly: I hear what you have both said about taking feedback and working with councils, but I am looking at the evidence from the District Councils' Network and the LGA, and it does not really tie in with what you have been saying, to be frank. The District Councils' Network says, "The continued uncertainty is actively hampering councils from investing in and improving their services, delaying procurement, and undermining local authorities' efforts to increase recycling rates, deliver greater value to local taxpayers and shift towards net zero." That is not a very positive statement, is it?

Tamara Finkelstein: I would not want to pretend that some of the delays and uncertainties—I can see why that has provoked that. I think, as Ms Bourne was saying, that we are working really closely with them to give as much information as possible. Actually, the feedback from businesses was



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behind a lot of the decision to delay EPR by a year to give more time for that co-creation. I think what we are doing is trying to give them as much information as we can.

- Q11 **Mr Djanogly:** Can I just come back to you, Ms Finkelstein, on the delay issue? Again, the LGA said, “Defra has suggested the delay in implementation of EPR is in part to allow councils more time to prepare and adjust services”—I think that is what you just said—“However, councils cannot use the additional time to prepare until they receive a timeline for implementation and confirmation of funding.” In other words, we have a chicken and egg situation that does not seem to be a very positive one.

Tamara Finkelstein: It was feedback particularly from business, who have more of the information that they are looking for on how EPR will work. What local authorities are looking for—we hope to give it to them as soon as possible, but I recognise that the delay is really difficult—is the response to our consultation on consistent collection, which we hope to get out as soon as possible. We realise that they absolutely need that in order to do the planning. Once we have done that, it will also go with a waste infrastructure pathway, which will give them more information and more information for those who want to build bits of infrastructure that are relevant. There is more to come to give them the kind of clarity they are looking for—I absolutely recognise that.

Chair: Thank you very much.

- Q12 **Mrs Drummond:** Ms Finkelstein, you said that you have a comprehensive plan but no detail. How can it be comprehensive without detail?

Tamara Finkelstein: I would not say we have a comprehensive plan with no detail; we have got quite a lot of the detail. If I take extended producer responsibility, we have responded to the second consultation. We have given details about the statutory instruments that are now coming up, and we are consulting on those, so we are getting that detail. We have a date for when EPR will be in place, so quite a lot of detail we are building out, and similarly on the other elements, but there are also other elements that we will be doing more on, not all of which we need to be doing immediately. There are other areas around textiles or plastics where there is quite a lot of the detail but more still to come. It is a comprehensive plan to get where we need to get to, and there is detail on the key areas, I would say.

- Q13 **Mrs Drummond:** In 2021, I think you did a survey or a consultation, but the findings of that have not been published yet. Is that correct?

Tamara Finkelstein: That is on consistent collection. We will very imminently be publishing the response on consistent collection, which I recognise is a frustration for local authorities.

- Q14 **Mrs Drummond:** It is all adding up. We have this wonderful plan and we want to do something, but nobody knows what is happening or when and they cannot plan. Local authorities have contracts with various waste



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management companies. Are they supposed to carry on with them? Are they going to cancel them? You can see the confusion going on. I just want to know what sort of timeline you have, because at some point you are going to have to make a decision as to what you want to see. At the moment, it seems as if we are putting it on the back burner. You have talked about the economic stuff and so on, but at some point it has to be put in place.

Tamara Finkelstein: I would say there is quite a lot of the information out there, and we have been having the conversations to explain that to others. There are some pieces that still need to be put in place but, as I say, those are imminent on consistent collection and on the waste infrastructure plan. That will give people further information. I don't know whether Emma wants to say any more about the information that we have been sharing with both local authorities and businesses.

Emma Bourne: On consistent collections, acknowledging the explanation provided by Ms Finkelstein that our intention is to publish the Government response as soon as possible, I think there is still quite a bit of detail out there, and that is what we have been talking about with local authorities for quite some time. The overall approach and intention were set out originally in the resources and waste strategy, and have been consulted on, so the direction of travel has been clear for some time. We have also set out some of the clear commitments. For example, on flexible plastics, we set out a clear commitment that there would be consistent collection of such plastics from 2027.

There are areas where, at present, there are quite low levels of collection for those types of materials, where we are providing a clear indication and signal to local government to start gearing up preparedness for those collections going forward. Granted, there is more that we can and should be doing, and we are working on that, but we are trying to give as much information as we possibly can to all parts of the value chain, because it is the whole supply chain that needs to gear around these reforms as it becomes available. We also need to design it with them, so that we can be confident that it works in practice.

Q15 **Mrs Drummond:** Again, going back to consistent collection, every single local authority seems to have a different type of collection, which makes it very difficult. But it is also very expensive, because not everybody is doing the same thing—there are economies of scale and so on. Is that something that you are going to be working on? You said 2027, which seems quite a long way away still.

Emma Bourne: 2027 just relates to the flexible plastics, which are a particular material.

Q16 **Chair:** For clarity, can you explain what they are?

Emma Bourne: Crisp packets or the film that you have on top of a plastic carton that you may get strawberries in—that sort of thing. It is something that is quite widespread, with a lot of food materials in particular. The consistent collection of that is currently quite low, but obviously if we can

improve that significantly it could have a real impact and benefit, particularly for the food and drink sector, but also more broadly in terms of the supply of recycled material. Where there are particular innovations such as that, we have been setting up direction of travel. That was communicated as part of the EPR consultation response, I believe.

More broadly, we have not yet confirmed the timelines, you are correct. That will form part of the consultation response to which Ms Finkelstein refers. We are gearing up to ensure that we are ready to support local authorities as soon as we are able to provide that clarity, which will be as soon as possible.

Tamara Finkelstein: On your point about getting the consistency so that people know, collecting the same everywhere and having labelling such that people know what to do with what is absolutely at the heart of this. That is what this reform will achieve.

Q17 **Mrs Drummond:** Are you saying that you can actually recycle crisp packets? Because I did not think you could. That goes back to the point that nobody knows what they can and cannot recycle, and it depends on which area they are in anyway.

Emma Bourne: At the moment, many local authorities do not have the facilities to recycle those types of materials, so they do not collect them. What we are trying to do is gear up to that being possible in the future by providing a clear signal to local government that they will have obligations to do so, so that they will start investing in that infrastructure. We have seen a really strong interest from industry in improving the supply of recycled flexible plastics so that they can also adopt more environmentally friendly materials, which is part of the thread of these reforms.

Q18 **Mrs Drummond:** Again, I come back to the fact that people, local authorities and waste management companies need to be able to plan. When are you going to start putting statutory instruments or legislation in place saying that people have got to do it by this date? If they do not have that, they will not do it.

Emma Bourne: That will follow very soon after the publication of the Government response.

Q19 **Chair:** I want to pick up on the issue of extended producer responsibility. There has obviously been a lot of debate about this, particularly with the examples in Scotland as a comparator. What about the fee structure, because that has not been published yet? That puts them on the back foot with planning.

Tamara Finkelstein: On deposit return schemes?

Chair: Yes.

Tamara Finkelstein: The decision on that was to ensure that we were developing a scheme that would be interoperable across the UK. That is being looked at now. We are not at the point at which we are setting an amount that is the deposit on each bottle. The Scottish scheme had got to

the point of setting 20p per bottle, but we need to take that back in as we look at an interoperable scheme, and as we get a scheme administrator in place who looks at what the evidence is and what to set. But the guideline that Scotland came to is interesting.

Q20 Chair: What conversations are you having with industry? You have to have a whole different production line if you are taking in old bottles, cleaning them and reusing them, or indeed, smashing them and recycling. It depends on what you want to do with the bottles at the end of it. Do you see the circular economy really growing in this area, and if so, how long is that going to take?

Tamara Finkelstein: May I say something on that and then bring in Ms Bourne? Right across the whole work on collection and packaging reforms, with the extended producer responsibility, the deposit return scheme and consistent collection, it is about how you collect things in as uncontaminated a way as possible, so that they can then be used. That changes your packaging. The whole of those reforms is around getting the circular economy.

Beyond that, a whole range of other areas, such as textiles, waste electricals and batteries, have a set of reforms that will establish those changes. Not all the detail is out there, but the vision and direction of travel is very visible and is leading to people investing in different sorts of infrastructure to be able to recycle things.

I have been to see a number of big investments in the recycling of this sort of waste. As well as responding to the consistent collection consultation, we will shortly then put out this waste infrastructure road map, which will give people a vision as to where waste will be coming from that gives a bit more confidence to be able to invest in some of the plants.

Q21 Chair: When is that road map going to be released?

Tamara Finkelstein: That will be shortly after—

Chair: Shortly in civil service terms—what does that mean?

Tamara Finkelstein: It will be released shortly after we have been able to put to you and published a consistent collection consultation. We are trying to that as soon as possible, and that will then be ready to go immediately after or very soon after.

Emma Bourne: On the DRS specifically, to go to your question, this is not a new concept; there are over 50 DRSs around the world. It is a globally proven model. We are not looking to reinvent the wheel by any stretch, and many of the companies that we are working with—the major drinks manufacturers—have experience in these markets. They know the logistics and infrastructure that they require to do this well. In many ways, we are learning from them, and we are listening to them, and the question is: how do we support you in that process rather than instructing it from the centre? The scheme administrator for DRS is an industry-led body—that is the established international practice—so we would expect what is called a



deposit management organisation to play the critical role in determining that deposit level and thinking that through and working that through with that market.

- Q22 **Chair:** These reforms have been delayed quite considerably. Obviously, covid had an impact on the capacity of local authorities to deal with things. Is that the reason for the delay or is it that there was not proper planning in place in the first place?

Tamara Finkelstein: I would say it was a combination of things. There is no doubt that we made the decision in covid because of both our own capacity—there was a range of things that we needed to do on food security and other things—and the position that business and local authorities were in. It was about them being able to deal and engage with us on this that delayed some of this work; that definitely caused some of the delay.

We then had quite a lot of political change and that meant not just agreeing things within our own Department, but across Government. There was some change on that. Business clearly felt that, given our delays in providing information and the impact that might have on prices, that the date we had for extended producer responsibility would be too soon. We therefore delayed it a year but wanted to give clarity that that was the date that we were on. If you look at the IPA reports, I would definitely say that we were not set up for as much success as I would have liked.

Chair: I appreciate the honesty.

Tamara Finkelstein: Hindsight is a good thing. There are things we would have done differently. It might be worth me bringing in Ms Homer on this because we have made some changes not just around how we are managing this programme, but more broadly to take a real step up in our ability to deliver and ensure we have got the capability and capacity to do that.

Sarah Homer: We obviously took the IPA report of last June incredibly seriously, and we have looked to implement all the recommendations really comprehensively. We have been looking at the programme management office set-up, the governance of the programme and the programme's resourcing. The Committee will be pleased to know that we are now fully resourced on the programme.

- Q23 **Chair:** Are they all full-time civil servants or are they outside consultants?

Sarah Homer: Most of them—in fact, almost all of them—are full-time civil servants. We have some contingent labour, but we are looking to reduce that overall, and we have had a very robust approach across all of our major programmes to look at in-housing and insourcing as much of the programme capacity as possible.

As Ms Finkelstein has alluded to, we have now set up—or she has set up—my DG area for portfolio delivery. We are very much looking at our



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capability, capacity and resource models across our GMPP portfolio. We brought in over 100 new programme delivery specialists over the past 12 months. We have now got a delivery partner such that we are able to flex our resource and bring in resource at very short notice, and that has been to the benefit of many of our programmes—

Chair: This Committee has been saying for a long time that we need more people running projects properly.

Sarah Homer: Absolutely.

Q24 **Chair:** In a way, you have partly answered what you would have done differently. Do you also acknowledge, Ms Finkelstein, that there was not good enough project management in place? I suppose you have accepted the IPA report, so you probably have.

Tamara Finkelstein: Look, we set up as a proper programme and as a portfolio across these different areas. What have we learned? Actually, the kind of capacity and capability that we need, taking a real step up in that; and the consistent and really open engagement with stakeholders, which we have really taken a step up on—we cannot do this without really hearing from our stakeholders—

Q25 **Chair:** Do you think you were being a bit Whitehall-centric at the beginning?

Tamara Finkelstein: I don't think that. I think we were doing a lot of engagement, but we have learned to build our own confidence in just having the interaction and engagement, hearing the sorts of things we are being told by some of the stakeholders we need to work with—really hearing and responding to those. I would not want to say that the team was not doing that before, but I think we have to take a real step up if we are successfully to deliver this sort of programme or some of our farming reforms. We know that, and we are learning that all the time.

Q26 **Chair:** As you say, it is a portfolio, and there are lots of things and moving parts—everything from food waste to deposit return, using the circular economy and loads of areas. Do you now realise that it was more complex than was first appreciated when the plan and the target were set?

Tamara Finkelstein: I do think that we had a good appreciation of the complexity and of the interdependencies. I do feel that we set out that vision in 2018, which built on the 25-year environment plan, and that we have built out from that. We have built the policies and the implementation. As I say, there were external factors. We have learned a huge amount as a Department about how to deliver really effectively through what we have had to deliver for EU exit as well. We continue to build our capability. I think we are using that really effectively now, but we will continue to have to do that and to build in that way.

Q27 **Mr Djanogly:** To go into the programme management side of things a little more, I am looking at paragraph 14 of the NAO Report: "Defra did not do enough to put in place essential aspects of programme



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management when it set up the collection and packaging reforms programme.” Ms Homer, do you agree with that? Will the reforms that you have just been talking about be enough to address that?

Sarah Homer: We have addressed that very robustly over the past 18 months. In terms of the initial set-up, I think we all agree that running the three aspects of the programme separately—they were originally set up as three separate projects—was not the best approach to have taken initially. We completely accept that that was not the most optimal way to set the programme up at the beginning. We are now running it as an integrated programme. We have brought in programme delivery specialists and a programme director last year. She was in place for most of the year. Emma started this year as the programme delivery specialist—

Q28 **Mr Djanogly:** Sorry, why did it take five years to see that the plan needed resetting?

Sarah Homer: We were resetting during that period, but I think it is fair to say that we had not matured the programme infrastructure before last year.

Q29 **Mr Djanogly:** May I go back to my initial question? I think you agreed with that NAO finding. Will the procedures you have put in place be adequate to solve the problem?

Sarah Homer: Yes, they absolutely will. We have another IPA review this autumn, and we look forward to supporting that review. I think—I believe—it will be far more positive as an outcome.

Q30 **Mr Djanogly:** Thank you. Ms Finkelstein, in what ways were these reforms more complex to deliver than you originally expected?

Tamara Finkelstein: They were clearly a complex set of reforms. As you go into them, the interdependencies become clearer, but I do not think it was because we did not get the complexity. We set up the programmes as a portfolio, and we have continued to evolve and improve the way in which we are operating it.

Inevitably, with a major programme, there are complexities that come out of the woodwork. If you take the deposit return scheme, realising that interoperability was going to be key between the different devolved Administrations has been a complexity that we have had to manage. It has different elements to it—not just implementation, but political elements to be managed. As I say, we have also had various external factors that were adding complexity. It is a complex programme, and more complexity has emerged, but I do think we are set up in a good way to manage that now.

Q31 **Chair:** You have talked about working with devolution as a complexity, but we have had devolved Administrations in the UK for rather a long time—*[Interruption.]* Yes, 24 years; I knew my Welsh colleague would be able to update me on that. It is odd that it sounds like it might have been a bit of an afterthought that there would be an issue with interoperability.



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Tamara Finkelstein: Maybe I will bring in Ms Bourne, who has experience in this from previous jobs as well.

Emma Bourne: Yes. It certainly is not an afterthought. It has been baked into the design and the way the programme has run from the outset, from what I can see. I started in April, but it looks like there is a long history of joint governance and joint working very closely with the devolved Administrations at both official and ministerial level throughout their development.

However, as I think my devolved Administration official counterparts would agree, it requires constant work, care and maintenance to make sure that we are all pulling in the same direction, understanding each other's point of view, implementing this in a way that works for our sometimes differing ministerial interests, and engaging with our stakeholders with a recognition of some of the issues that they will be discussing in each of their nations, but also pulling that together into a coherent, unified understanding of the stakeholder picture and what is required. It is a constant piece of work—I mean that in a positive way, because if we do it well, it can really enrich how we implement these reforms and their impact across the piece.

Q32 **Mrs Drummond:** One of the criticisms in the Report is that there are very few pilot schemes. Scotland was going to do a pilot scheme for the deposit return scheme, and that has been delayed. Are you going to be doing more pilot schemes, or are you going to rely on the devolved authorities to do them?

Tamara Finkelstein: I will make a start on that. We have quite a lot of information from different sources—small trials and so on. Orkney did a trial; there are trials by supermarket groups of parts of the system. The best information we actually have is from the schemes that are being run in other countries.

Mrs Drummond: I was going to come on to that.

Tamara Finkelstein: As Ms Bourne said, we have been to see them, and so have Ministers, to learn from them. That learning is going to be absolutely crucial. A lot of our partners are working in these other schemes, so they know how they work. That is going to be really important.

Doing a pilot here is really hard because you have to do it end to end; it does not really work unless you are doing it all the way through the system. Doing small trials and so on feels like the best way, combined with the international experience. That is the conclusion that we have drawn.

Emma, you have been to see quite a few. I don't know whether you want to say anything more.



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Emma Bourne: Absolutely. Certainly, learning from international counterparts has been a key point—not just from those who administer the schemes, but from the businesses and other stakeholders.

Q33 **Chair:** Who does it well? Which countries?

Emma Bourne: That is hard. There are a lot of good practice examples. My day minus one was a trip to Belgium to see Fost Plus, which leads the EPR but is also going to be leading the deposit return scheme; it has some excellent learning. Just last week, I was in the Republic of Ireland, learning from it; it is about to launch its deposit return scheme in February, so it has a lot of learning for us on how you go through the set-up phase, particularly in the current economic context, with a lot of the same stakeholders and a lot of the same businesses.

Each scheme brings something different, and it is really interesting talking to them about how they tailor it to the specifics of some of the consumer behaviour change issues that you were referring to at the start of the session, but also to some of the business sentiment, the business factors and how supply chains operate differently.

I am dodging the question by not really giving you an answer—I appreciate that—but I am saying that the variety out there means that we feel we have a wealth of information to draw on, which we can then think about and apply in our context.

Q34 **Mrs Drummond:** I feel a bit responsible for this, because I remember talking to Michael Gove about my experience in America, where I lived, where they do have a very good deposit return scheme; my kids got a lot of their pocket money from doing that. It seemed to me that it was ridiculous that we were not doing it, because we have plastic bottles, cans and everything strewn by the roadsides. But they do not have kerbside recycling. Presumably one of the other countries that you are looking at does have kerbside as well.

Has anyone actually put this into place? These schemes all sound like they are about to happen. Is there any country that has actually done it already?

Emma Bourne: Yes. EPR particularly is quite widespread. There are about 50 established and operational deposit return schemes, and there are a whole load more that are in the pipeline and coming to fruition. We have been looking at schemes at different levels of maturity, because obviously we can learn from those.

There are some differences between the contexts in which some of these schemes were set up. You have referred to kerbside collections. In this country we have an established and mature kerbside collection regime for many of these materials, so we have been looking at some of the specifics we have encountered. That was not true of some of the early extended producer responsibility schemes. That is why I say that there is no one example that we herald as best practice, because everyone has a slightly



different context. It is about what we can learn from that and apply in ours.

Q35 **Mrs Drummond:** We have very poor recycling, haven't we? Considering kerbside recycling, there are a lot of people who do not—

Tamara Finkelstein: That is the interesting point. We have got as far as we can with kerbside recycling of these sorts of bottles. It is at 70%, whereas some of the deposit return schemes are at 90% or 95%. It is really crucial to get uncontaminated bottles through the system to ensure that what we are doing is reuse rather than some of the highly carbon-resourced procedures that are involved if you do not get non-contaminated material. On the litter front, the thing that I was very surprised by is that 54% by volume of our litter is these bottles and cans.

Mrs Drummond: Exactly.

Tamara Finkelstein: The combination of getting uncontaminated or limited-contamination recycle and reducing litter is what drives the benefits of this system. As I say, we see it work. Ministers went to see a scheme in Sweden that is really quite mature.

Q36 **Mrs Drummond:** That is why I am so keen to get it done as soon as possible, which is why it is very frustrating to hear you not coming up with firm dates.

Tamara Finkelstein: The dates will come swiftly, but one of the things that we are doing now is making it interoperable across the UK. We will see where we get to on dates, but that is really worth while, because if different parts of the UK are accepting different bottles, that produces an element of complexity. The companies operate right across the UK, so I think that will really make it a lot easier as a system. That is what we are going to report on.

Q37 **Mrs Drummond:** The burden is going to be on the producers of bottles and cans, rather than local authorities. It will eventually go back on the consumers, I suspect, but this is all about making our country greener and cleaner.

Tamara Finkelstein: As Ms Bourne says, the way this works is that it is a private sector scheme administrator, and that is how it operates in other countries. That is the position.

Q38 **Chair:** I mentioned consumer behaviour at the beginning; Ms Bourne, you have mentioned the Irish model. Except for some of the cities, in parts of Ireland you have to pay for your waste removal by black bag, so the incentive to recycle is immense, and there are many outlets where you can do that, whether they be supermarkets or waste recycling centres. When you are looking at this, are you also looking at encouraging or supporting charges for non-recyclable waste, to encourage people to separate it and to prompt behaviour? Is that even in your thinking as a Department?

Emma Bourne: That is not currently in the scope of how we are designing either EPR or DRS, but obviously we are keen to learn, as you say, from the very different nuances in how kerbside collections operate in the context of EPR and DRS, because that helps us to understand how we structure the incentives in the right way. It is not currently part of our thinking, but it is certainly a contextual factor that is relevant.

Q39 **Chair:** Obviously a lot of issues are in rural areas—compared with urban areas, where I can walk two minutes to recycle everything from electrical waste to textiles or whatever it might be. We recognise that that is a problem. What will be the next programme that you deliver? When will it be? We have talked about deposit return, but after that.

Tamara Finkelstein: We will be delivering extended producer responsibility, the consistent collection approach and the deposit return scheme. The publication that we put out in July touched on seven other sectors, including textiles, waste electric equipment and batteries, all of which we will be exploring to improve reuse and recycling.

Q40 **Chair:** So you have not yet alighted on which will be next or when that will be.

Tamara Finkelstein: On waste electrical and batteries, we are going to put out a consultation very shortly. There are schemes in both of those areas, but we will consult on changes to those schemes to make them even better than they currently are.

Q41 **Chair:** Is there a timeframe for when changes might happen?

Tamara Finkelstein: As I say, we will be consulting shortly, and that will include a timeline on when that element of change will come through. Not all of the seven areas have got a long-term detailed timeline, but there is a vision and approach and we will work through those.

Chair: The thing is that, as others have said, it is about having certainty for business, and indeed for consumers.

It is interesting how much metal can be in certain electrical components, which can be valuable.

Mrs Drummond: Lithium.

Q42 **Chair:** The Royal Mint has a licence to make interesting jewellery out of the gold in some of these bits of equipment. In your consultation, will you be discussing what valuable minerals, resources and metals could be recycled from some of the waste that we are talking about? Ms Bourne?

Emma Bourne: I'm not sure, actually.

Chair: If you don't know, that's fine. Ms Homer?

Sarah Homer: I would just like to talk about sustainable IT. DEFRA, as a Department, has been leading across Government in terms of sustainable IT.



Q43 **Chair:** I think we probably know what you mean by sustainable, but for anyone watching, can you explain what you mean?

Sarah Homer: Sustainable IT is where we look at the components, the way that computers, technologies, servers and phones are manufactured, and what elements could be recycled or reused. There are a number of areas that we get into, whether or not it is the elements—minerals and metals, as you say—where we have been working with our partner suppliers to look at how we can recycle those in a sustainable way and not export that waste. We have been working with our suppliers on how we can take those items apart and recycle here in the UK, which we are doing.

We are also looking at how we can recycle laptops and phones to schools or other charitable causes. We have been leading on that, and we have been looking at how in Government we can incentivise and work with the sector to make it far more attractive to recycle, upcycle and look at more modular manufacture of those items so that you do not have to throw away the whole item and you can replace parts far more easily.

Q44 **Chair:** I think we have a generation for whom built-in obsolescence is a dirty word. That is easy to say, but when it comes to the manufacturer, will the British Government really manage to persuade the likes of Apple and Samsung to do what they want unless there is pressure from around the world? I do not mean to be disrespectful, but DEFRA is a minnow in this game, if you look at global reach, so how will you influence organisations like that, or are you looking for smaller scale?

Sarah Homer: At the last two COPs, DEFRA has brought together a parallel event. All the big manufacturers—Microsoft, Apple, DXC, Vodafone—were there and were all really keen to look at this. You will be aware that with the financial reporting standards, sustainability is now one of the things they will be evaluated on. We really think that there is a body of steam behind it.

Q45 **Chair:** It is all great that we are hearing about these things that will happen one day, but how fast do you think we will see progress?

Sarah Homer: We have targets within DEFRA regarding how much of our IT should be recycled—

Chair: You mean within the Department?

Sarah Homer: Yes, within the Department. But we are working with industry regarding how we can set industry standards around that, so we could certainly write to you with more information on the sustainable IT strategy.

Chair: When we talk to businesses, we find that most people want to do this, but during lockdown we learned how hard it is just to give a bit of old IT to a school and make it usable, because you have to go through lots of processes. It is interesting, but I slightly worry that it will take a while to do this. Ms Finkelstein?



Tamara Finkelstein: I understand from colleagues that we are doing work on extracting and retaining more precious metals from materials. As for the requirements on waste electricals and batteries, we are updating them to be relevant to the sorts of batteries we now have and the ways in which we purchase them online. We are looking at how we ensure that there is more recycling of materials.

Q46 **Chair:** Can I touch on food waste? There is tons of food waste at farm level, even before food gets to our fridges and runs out past the sell-by date, and we put it in our own bins. There is an awful lot of waste there.

In 2018, the Government committed £15 million to fund food redistribution. I think you only spent £12.5 million, and in 2020 you scrapped that pledge. I wonder whether you are looking at revisiting that. What will be happening to try to discourage food waste at farm level? Obviously it is not always the farmers' fault that this happens; it is because they cannot get pickers or the crops rot because of the weather, which are slightly different issues. But what are you doing about it?

Tamara Finkelstein: We have spent money on large and small redistribution organisations around surplus food. We fund WRAP, a waste resources organisation that is really well placed to take action on food waste; as I have said, it did Food Waste Action Week, and it does a lot on prevention of food waste.

Q47 **Chair:** The money that was there to help redistribution has gone, has it not?

Tamara Finkelstein: That is not my understanding, without being told.

Q48 **Chair:** Okay. It would be helpful if you could write to us, if you do not have the details in front of you. It is perhaps a niche point or a bit detailed, but if you could write to us, it would be helpful, because even in inner-city constituencies people are concerned about food waste.

Tamara Finkelstein: I understand that it was a pilot fund and is now being built into some of our work on farm payments, but we will write to you, to be sure about that.

Chair: That would be helpful to know.

Q49 **Ben Lake:** I would like to turn to some of the longer-term ambitions and your plans to realise them. I was quite struck to read in the National Audit Office Report about household recycling rates, which have plateaued since 2011. I am interested to hear why you think that is.

Tamara Finkelstein: That plateauing is what shows us that we had to take some really strong action. The evidence that we have around behaviours is that that requires a move to consistent collection. Unless people have that clarity about what they need to recycle in every area, how the labelling is working and how recycling is collected in every local authority, we will not get that change. That is what drives that reform. We do not think that we will make that shift—I recognise we have missed targets as a result—until we have put that in place.



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Q50 **Ben Lake:** Let us go straight into that. Given that the 2018 strategy was the last major statement, and the plateauing has happened since 2011, why do you think that it took so long for some sort of considered action to take place? I note that in Wales, for example, rates continued to increase and are currently at some 56.7% for household recycling.

Tamara Finkelstein: We have been taking action to put this in place; it just takes a bit of time to put the reform in place. We legislated to be able to do some of these reforms in the Environment Act, which was passed in 2021, and then implement it. It just takes some time to implement—

Q51 **Chair:** Is it legislation that has been the main delay?

Tamara Finkelstein: I would not say that it was the delay. It took time for the Environment Act to go through, but, as we said, there are a number of things, compounded, that delayed the programme overall. That is what we need in order to make that shift.

Q52 **Ben Lake:** Forgive me, but I am an MP from Wales. What discussions are being held with representatives of the Welsh Government to see what is happening in Wales? It is quite interesting that even in some rural local authorities, their matching rate is in the mid-60s in household recycling. What discussions are you having with them? Are there any lessons to be learned or ways of working that could be replicated in England to boost it a little more than the 44% we are currently seeing?

Tamara Finkelstein: We have a strong set of relationships. I might let Ms Bourne say more.

Emma Bourne: We work collaboratively, absolutely, day to day. My counterpart in the Welsh Government sits on all our major programme groups, as do his team. It is not that we consult them every once in a while—far from it. They are an integrated part, and much of it—for example, EPR—is a joint endeavour, so we are constantly learning from each other about how we can deliver these reforms to the best effect, drawing on their experience. That should extend to the future as well.

We have focused on collection and packaging reforms as the main pillar of our current live delivery, but we are also incubating, as we set out in “Maximising Resources, Minimising Waste”, that future pipeline of reforms to make sure that we are following through. Much of that touches on local authority recycling issues as well—for different materials, but just as important for future reform.

Q53 **Ben Lake:** That is all quite reassuring to hear, but the National Audit Office Report was quite critical—especially in paragraph 8 on page 7, where it suggested that DEFRA “has not yet identified a clear outline path to achieving all of its resources and waste ambitions”. It goes on to say that it “does not know when decisions about new interventions need to be made by in order to ensure realistic timeframes for design, testing and implementation, nor does it know, in broad terms, what sequencing of interventions is likely to produce most benefit over the long-term”. I am interested to know your response to that, and—if you have some



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answers—to hear you say, “This is when we will have the plan, and this is when we will achieve some of these targets and catch up with some of the other countries.”

Tamara Finkelstein: Let me start on that, and then I will bring in Ms Bourne and maybe Ms Homer about our approach. It is always a bit of a balance: how much do you try to map out detail, and how much do you focus on the detailed implementation of some of your reforms and be clear about the direction of travel of others and begin to evolve them over time? To set out detail on exactly when every decision will be made, all the way through to 2042, is just unrealistic. Our experience is that it does not actually help businesses and local authorities, because they do not believe it. There is a balance to strike and really understand—I am very conscious of the criticism here—how we get that mapped out properly.

We have been doing quite a lot of work in the programme on this. We have the details of the three elements of the collection and packaging reforms. We have had the NAO Report setting out the direction of travel on the seven other areas that will be critical elements to how we meet the targets. It gives quite a lot of detail on when we expect to do things by and so on. I do not think that there is everything that colleagues at the NAO would say they want to see, but, for us, we feel that it gets the balance right.

Emma Bourne: I can provide a bit more detail on some of the specifics, to give you a sense of the forward look. The “Maximising Resources, Minimising Waste” publication that Ms Finkelstein referred to sets out our proposed approach across seven sectors: construction, textiles, furniture, electronics, food, road vehicles, and plastics and packaging. There are some quite specific actions in there that symbolise the next step in the development of those reforms.

The collection and packaging reforms have been through pretty extensive consultation; I think there have been seven consultations. We are now in the design, delivery and implementation phase of those reforms in the main part, whereas the work set out in “Maximising Resources, Minimising Waste” is at the policy development and consultation phase, drawing on research that we have been undertaking in the meantime. For example, in the spring of next year we intend to put out a code of practice for the sustainable use of soil in construction, to consult on a ban on textile waste from landfill, and to consult on in-store takeback and separation of textile waste. We are also going to consult to remove fees for bulky furniture collections, and very soon we are starting a new trial reporting system for end of life vehicles. There are a whole raft of different reforms in the pipeline.

Q54 **Ben Lake:** Because of pressures on time, it might be useful if you could write to us to set out your expectations for these different measures in terms of improving the overall waste recycling rate.

Tamara Finkelstein: We’ve got our environmental improvement plan, which has a lot of our headline targets. I suspect that this criticism of,



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“What is absolutely everything you’re going to do, exactly when, all the way through to sometime in 2050” might recur. We think the best approach is to set out the vision, to be clear about our pathways and the elements of it, but to zone in on the detail of the areas where we are then consulting and legislating. I will briefly bring in Ms Homer on that, just to explain our thinking, because I suspect we will get that in future reports.

Sarah Homer: Thank you very much. As the programme has matured after the last 12 months, we have an updated theory of change. We are looking at an updated target operating model and we have the infrastructure road map that we talked about earlier, which we are looking to publish as soon as we can after the guidance has been issued. We think we have a really strong plan as to how we are going to document and lay these things out. As Ms Finkelstein has said, it is challenging to do it through to 2050, but we have some key elements in place.

- Q55 **Chair:** What you are saying, in summary, is that where you have got these aims, they’re certain, and then you will fill in the detail as you go along. Obviously, you are consulting, but seven consultations on one issue suggests you are consulting in order to bring industry with you, so that you are not worried about going back and refining it with them.

All witnesses indicated assent.

Chair: Okay. Credit for not saying from Whitehall, “We’ve got it right in one go,” I suppose. But it still takes a long time and we’re delayed.

- Q56 **Mrs Drummond:** Does your road map include stopping exporting? I think we export half our plastics at the moment. You talked about exporting other bits as well. Is that in the road map? If it is, when are we going to stop exporting our waste to other countries?

Tamara Finkelstein: Shall I make a start? Exporting waste to other countries is not in itself the wrong thing to do if they have the facilities in which to do these things. There is a commitment to no longer send any plastic waste to non-OECD countries because of concerns about how that might be used; we’ll be consulting on how to do that shortly. A really important part of ensuring that we only have legal waste exports going on is our waste tracking programme, which will give us a lot more data and allow us to ensure that what is going on meets our waste export requirements. That’s the plan.

- Q57 **Mrs Drummond:** That leads us to my questions about resource efficiency. Why haven’t you spent more time improving resource efficiency—that is, looking at the design and production bits, and considering the materials used in the production for which the products can be reused and or repaired?

Tamara Finkelstein: I will start and then perhaps bring in Ms Bourne. We very much operate by the waste hierarchy: how we get things out of landfill and use it in terms of energy and getting energy from it; but with a preference to recycle, then to reuse and then to prevent by doing the sort



of design changes you mention. That is exactly what we're trying to do: push things up that waste hierarchy.

The publication that we did in July, "Maximising Resources, Minimising Waste", was exactly about identifying, in areas like waste electricals and textiles, how you do it in such a way that you end up having reuse or prevention, including how you require producers to make things that are repairable. We have done work on behaviours: you also need to give people really good information about how you repair something if you are actually going to make that useful. So we are doing a lot; the publication says that a lot around different areas of resource efficiency. I don't know whether you want to add a bit to that, Ms Bourne.

Emma Bourne: Just to expand on that slightly, we legislated in 2021 so that manufacturers are required to supply spare parts for things like washing machines and fridges, to encourage exactly that kind of reuse and repair; and we are consulting later this year on extended producer responsibility for waste electricals, alongside the consultation on batteries. We are also doing some work with WRAP, the organisation to which Ms Finkelstein referred earlier and with which we have a close partnership. It is looking at a viability assessment of a broader range of measures on reuse and refill as well. So we have actions that have happened and actions on which we are consulting. But we are also building that future view: where can we do more and where can we go further in the future?

Q58 **Mrs Drummond:** Do you need any further statutory targets, to make it more effective?

Tamara Finkelstein: I know there were questions, when we did the Environment Act targets, as to whether something should be in place on resource efficiency itself. We didn't find something that we thought captured that in a target effectively. We continue to do work around measurement to see whether there is something that would usefully target that. It is critical to the target that we do have around using the amount of residual waste; we can't do that if we don't achieve this. So we have a strong incentive to do it and, as I say, the document sets out the different areas in which we are pushing things up the waste hierarchy.

Mrs Drummond: I ask because often people aren't going to do it unless they have to do it, with legislation or statutory—

Tamara Finkelstein: On textiles, for example, there has been some really good work voluntarily on how they manage it—sorry, how we collect the right data. Lots of organisations voluntarily collect the data, so you can see how textiles are used in the system, and there is an amount that is reused. But we do think we might need to move to statutory requirements—"no textiles to landfill", for example. That is all part of the new waste prevention programme.

Q59 **Mr Djanogly:** Is it not the case that many local authorities now are starting to charge for green bin collection? And I think a lot more are considering this. It is incredibly unpopular, not least in my own



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constituency—that is Huntingdonshire District Council, I should add. From the Department's point of view, could you just explain your policy towards this, please?

Tamara Finkelstein: Some of this will be part of the consistent collections publication. Ms Bourne, I don't know whether you want to give any more—

Emma Bourne: Local authorities can charge for garden waste collections, which I think is what you are talking about.

Mr Djanogly: Yes, green bins.

Emma Bourne: But food waste collections as part of consistent collections—we would not expect that to be charged for; in fact, the obligations will be to provide that for free.

Mr Djanogly: So you don't have a view as to whether they should or shouldn't charge for green bins.

Emma Bourne: At the moment, the evidence suggests to us that allowing charging is not inhibiting the recycling levels, but—

Mr Djanogly: It's not? That is very interesting to hear.

Q60 **Chair:** Do you know whether it is encouraging more composting if people are having to pay?

Emma Bourne: The honest answer is we don't know, but I am happy to try to find out.

Q61 **Mr Djanogly:** I want to go back to the longer-term theme that other colleagues have been talking about. I am looking now at paragraph 10 of the NAO Report: "Defra has not yet set out how the waste system as a whole needs to change to meet its multiple objectives and targets." So is it right, for instance, that you do not yet know what waste processing plants and energy-from-waste plants we are going to need?

Tamara Finkelstein: We are absolutely setting out a vision of how the waste system will develop, and the waste infrastructure pathway will give people more information on that. That will allow people to make decisions about future energy-from-waste plants. On those, I do not think there is any evidence we have an under-supply at the moment, because we are actually exporting some of our waste from energy. We have had a massive change in the amount of waste going to landfill, and some of that will move to that next bit of the hierarchy, which is the energy-from-waste plants, so there is really a role for those.

Looking long term, we will provide the information that will allow the market and local authorities to look at what they should be looking at in future. We have done modelling, and we do not think we are going to be left with stranded assets in terms of what we currently have or the plans in place. That is our understanding from the modelling we have done.

Q62 **Mr Djanogly:** Okay. The reason I use that as an example—this has come



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out in various ways—is this problem that history does not to stop with the 2018 paper and that the issues of 2018 are not necessarily the issues of today. Along with a lot of other people, I have recently been driving around the continent, and I have seen a lot of these recycling ideas. Frankly, a lot of them are much more advanced than ours. To a great degree, the progress that we made seems to have gone on ice. Would you agree with that? How do we kick-start all this and push it forward again to get people's attention?

Tamara Finkelstein: Having quite a comprehensive and major reform programme is a really good place to be. Actually, with some of the things we have put in place already, you can see the shift away from landfill, which you see in the Report. We have a landfill tax, and we have lots of measures to put that in place. Waste tracking is really going to help us to ensure that we see the sort of shifts we want to see. So I think we have in place exactly the right set of reforms to do that kick-starting you are talking about, but they are complex and they are change, and change is always hard. As you say, others have done some of these changes, so that really gives us confidence and examples that we can build on.

Q63 **Chair:** In another answer, Ms Bourne, you talked about removing fees for bulky furniture or bulky waste removal. Were you suggesting that you are going to require local authorities to do that?

Emma Bourne: We are consulting on that as part of the publication we released in July—"Maximising Resources, Minimising Waste". So we will be seeking views.

Q64 **Chair:** Would that be counted as an extra burden on local government? A lot of local government relies on those fees to cover the cost of removal.

Emma Bourne: We would look at any new burdens as part of that policy development process and include that as part of the scope of the consultation.

Q65 **Chair:** My own local authority looked at this on council estates, which it is obviously the landlord for, and it decided that it was not worth the cost of charging, because any dumped furniture would then cost a lot to remove. They made that judgment, but other local authorities do charge now. Have you picked up that there is more fly-tipping as a result of the charges?

Emma Bourne: We are looking at the full range of factors, such as how you do this in a way that, in the round, ensures that as much of this furniture as possible is being collected, refurbished or recycled. Certainly, avoiding fly-tipping would be one of the things we would want to factor into that.

Q66 **Chair:** I think the North London Waste Authority can now recycle mattresses, which are made of over 20 components, so there is progress on this, but it is difficult for people to get rid of mattresses.

Emma Bourne: We absolutely want to showcase exactly that type of good practice.



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Q67 Chair: It would be a very big dent in local authority budgets if this change were to happen right now. I think there would be a lot of concern from local councils, although we would all love to see more done not at a direct cost to the taxpayer.

On a couple of other things, when we last met you, I think—we see you so often, I cannot remember—we were talking about waste crime. We talked about the waste-tracking project, which you have mentioned a couple of times, Ms Finkelstein. Are you confident it will be completed by April 2025 and that it will be on budget? Actually, Ms Homer, I think you are mostly responsible for this, so are you confident?

Sarah Homer: We are confident. The budget is in place—

Q68 Chair: The whole £9.5 million?

Sarah Homer: Correct. We are going to private beta-test this autumn. We are looking to go public next year.

Chair: Next year?

Sarah Homer: Public beta. Then, the following year, we are going to launch it.

Q69 Chair: Without revealing too many of your secrets to the criminals, who do not want you to do this, because they are making quite a lot of money thank you very much out of the existing system, how are you going to design out incentives not to track waste? How are you going to make sure this really bites?

Sarah Homer: That is going to be the key point. Certainly, tracking waste from start to finish is going to mean that when things disappear, we will have more chance of spotting it, because the digitisation of the paper forms means that things will not so easily disappear. At the moment, boxes of paper and reports under desks mean that we do not have a live system for tracking things from end to end. Clearly, that is combined with other interventions, like with local authorities around fly-tipping, so there is clearly an issue with unscrupulous commercial waste—

Q70 Chair: I think our Report on that highlighted those concerns.

Sarah Homer: Correct. The interventions that we have include some of the pilots on support to local authorities for CCTV monitoring in hotspots. We hope the combination of the digital tracking and interventions like that will certainly minimise it. We have also increased the fines that local authorities can apply for those sorts of behaviours. We think it is a whole-system approach, but we have started with the data collection and being able to see that on a far more timely basis.

Q71 Chair: You mention data, one of our favourite subjects and biggest disappointments on this Committee. Accurate and timely data is very important in all the things we have been discussing, but so much of yours is absent or out of date. What are you doing about that? Have you got a plan within this plan to improve data?



Tamara Finkelstein: Let me start. We produce information monitoring progress on our resource and waste strategy every six months, and we draw on quite a lot of data that we have on that, and on quite a lot of statistics that we have. I have here a list of 11 different elements of it, but we do have data—some of it is ONS data, and some it is data that we collect. Where there are gaps, we are doing research to try to fill them. We also have a very big evaluation programme, which is helping us to develop new measures and the data that goes with them, so we are continually adding to the data that we have. Just as the NAO feels, I never feel that I have quite as much data as I would like, as colleagues know. But we are really committed to filling in that picture, so we are using what I think is actually a pretty good list of data. We are filling in the gaps with research and adding to it from the evaluation.

Q72 **Chair:** It is interesting, because not everyone will know that you are the policy professional lead for Whitehall, so through you comes the best way that all civil servants are providing policy advice to Ministers. Sitting where you are now, where do you think we are in terms of using data to help shape good policy? Have you got any plans for that at the higher level as well as in your own Department?

Tamara Finkelstein: We did some work to go with the analytical profession and the policy profession, and there is more to do in improving people's data literacy and use of data. Today is literally the launch of the Cabinet Secretary's One Big Thing, whereby every single civil servant in the whole of the civil service is going to do a certain number of hours of training on data that is appropriate for them. For the senior civil service—in DEFRA, we are doing it beyond that—there is a really excellent data masterclass. It is online, with videos, and it is excellent in terms of how you use data and data visualisation. As part of that, as well as doing the training, we are facilitating conversations in teams so that people know why it matters. As awful as the RAAC situation is, it was a base from which to go, "You have to know your data." You have to, really fast, know and be able to say where things are and what is going on.

Chair: There is a positive in the RAAC story, Ms Finkelstein.

Tamara Finkelstein: You use what you have, and similarly, for me, in the roll-out of our sustainable farming incentive. We cannot serve Ministers without being able, really quickly, to bring data together. You have asked us questions about behavioural insight and so on. Every one of those uses data.

Q73 **Chair:** It sounds like an improvement. I will not name them, but a former Labour Health Secretary asked for some information and was given two figures—one for England and one for the UK. The person providing the information did not realise why that might be an issue when comparing figures, so it seems like we may be moving on. This sounds like very good news—very bread and butter for us as a Committee.

Tamara Finkelstein: There is more to do. One further thing is that, with the fast stream and how we recruit, we have greatly increased the number



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of people we are recruiting from science, technology, engineering and maths backgrounds—not just into the engineering and science cohort, but into what has been the generalist or policy and operational cohort. We are on a journey.

Chair: More data suits this Committee. Things can only get better, as they say, with more data.

Thank you very much indeed for your time. The transcript of this session will be on the website in the next couple of days, uncorrected, and thank you to our colleagues at *Hansard* for that. We will be producing a Report on this after the conference recess, which is nicely vague. We will certainly be producing it before Christmas, and we will be keeping a close eye on this issue along with our sister Committees, the EFRA and Environmental Audit Committees. Thank you very much indeed, and thank you to Ms Bourne for her first appearance.