

Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee

Oral evidence: Preventing waste and enabling a circular economy, HC 929

Tuesday 9 September 2025

Ordered by the House of Commons to be published on 9 September 2025.

[Watch the meeting](#)

Members present: Alistair Carmichael (Chair); Sarah Bool; Charlie Dewhurst; Helena Dollimore; Sarah Dyke; Jayne Kirkham; Josh Newbury; Andrew Pakes; Jenny Riddell-Carpenter; Tim Roca; Henry Tufnell.

Business and Trade Committee member present: Charlie Maynard.

Questions 115 - 120

Witnesses

I: Emma Hardy MP, Minister for Water and Flooding, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs; David Hallam, Director for Floods and Water, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs.

Written evidence from witnesses:

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

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Emma Hardy and David Hallam.

Chair: The final section, at the risk of ending on a downbeat, is Global Plastics Treaty. Josh, you are going to lead us on this.

Q115 **Josh Newbury:** It is good to have you in, Minister. A lot of us had really high hopes for last month's talks in Geneva, but as we know, sadly they collapsed once again and nations could not even seem to agree on what the voting procedure should be. What is your view on the main reasons behind that? What were the main bones of contention?

Emma Hardy: Just on a personal level, I went to Geneva with high hopes myself. I have to say our team—the people from DEFRA going out to represent the United Kingdom—were incredible, and I just want to pay tribute to them. To say that we were all disappointed is probably an understatement: we were incredibly disappointed not to have secured that. Some officials had been working on this plastics treaty for years and were visibly upset by the end of it, so I pay 100% tribute to them and everything they have done on that.

In terms of why, there is a range of different reasons. There was a range of articles within the treaty that we just could not reach agreement on. As you know, the UK is part of the High Ambition Coalition, so of course I had meetings with various people from different countries but we met as the High Ambition Coalition. We now have High Ambition Coalition and friends. I get asked, "Oh, what is the definition of a friend of the High Ambition Coalition?" It is everybody who signed the Nice Wake-Up Call, so a huge number of countries.

It is very difficult to pinpoint exactly why it did not work, but fundamentally it did not work because we could not get all the countries to agree. So what happens now and how do we move forward? We had the Ellen MacArthur Foundation out there that brought with it lots of big business, so there was support from business. I was gutted because we went thinking that we could agree this multilateral treaty. But I am an optimist: we do not give up; we go and try again, keep having those conversations, talking to other countries and looking for ways we can negotiate and find common ground. That is the answer: you just keep going, do you not?

Q116 **Josh Newbury:** Yes, absolutely. It is a good attitude to have in the face of what was a really disappointing and actually quite soul-destroying result, particularly, as you said, for the people who had worked on it for so long.

We held an evidence session on the treaty back in July and something we were particularly concerned about was industry lobbying. There were even reports of independent scientists taking part in the negotiations being threatened. How big an impact do you think industry lobbying had



on those negotiations and what steps do you think we can take to address that when we come back to this next time?

Emma Hardy: I saw that evidence session and it was incredibly worrying that scientists would feel they were being pressured in any way. When I was over in Geneva I met with Richard just to show the support the United Kingdom has for our independent scientific community that is giving its evidence in good faith and that we 100% stand behind and support them.

As the United Kingdom we did not meet with lobbyists. My role out there in Geneva was to talk to Ministers from different countries to see where we could find common ground, and my focus was to try to find a way we could all come together. Of course with any treaty and any compromise anywhere, you are looking all the time for the landing zone that everybody could accept. That is my focus, but just to put on the record: the UK stands behind its scientific community.

Q117 **Josh Newbury:** That is really good to hear. As you all know, it has been highlighted that by the year 2060 global plastic waste could reach 1.7 billion tonnes, which could cost \$281 trillion to clean up: more than \$32,000 per person on the planet. Clearly global action is needed on this but, like you, I am an optimist and a pragmatist. Given that it seems a global treaty is out of reach at the moment, do you think now is the time to consider alternatives such as maybe a voluntary agreement with the coalition of the willing, perhaps through that High Ambition Coalition?

Emma Hardy: That is a really interesting point. There are definitely things we can do as a country, and of course Minister Creagh is leading on recycling and circular economy. There are also definitely conversations that can be had with some big companies through the Ellen MacArthur Foundation about actions they can take as well. We can start from home, which is exactly what the Government are doing with the Circular Economy Taskforce, and look at what we can do as a country.

Of course we need global action in this area; that is really the only way we can fundamentally tackle it, so I am not giving up on global action or saying that we should forget about this. We need to keep going, keep trying to build coalitions and arguments with other countries, and keep using diplomatic levers to have those conversations with different people about what the landing zone is that we can all accept. You could take action with a smaller number of countries and obviously we are considering everything, but if you want to deal with plastic pollution fundamentally, then we need to look at global action. We are doing a lot as a country and that is to be celebrated as well. If you are going to go out there and argue for something, you have to be able to stand up and say, "And this is what we're doing ourselves."

Q118 **Josh Newbury:** Do you think that there is room for maybe a two-tier approach, like we have had with some other international treaties, where everybody signs up to a common framework but some countries perhaps



phase in measures quicker than others? Is that a way of maybe breaking the deadlock, making some progress and then trying to encourage the laggards—for want of a better word—to come along later?

Emma Hardy: It is not something I have looked at yet, but on a general basis I am quite open for exploring all the different options we have. As I said, how I like to work as a politician is looking for where we can all join together and achieve the same aim, so I am keen for whatever we can do to reduce plastic pollution. That is not something we have been considering at the moment because our ambition is still that we achieve a Global Plastics Treaty. There would be no harm in me looking at other things, but I just want to be honest with the Committee: my focus is on the Global Plastics Treaty.

Q119 Josh Newbury: I wanted to ask you about the scandal of plastic waste exports. It seems to me that from successive Governments there have been really warm words but a lack of tangible action. This Committee looked at this back in 2022 and the recommendation then was a ban on exports by 2027. Back in 2019 both the Labour and Conservative manifestos pledged to bring in a ban of some form. The previous Government committed to a ban on exports to non-OECD countries, which only make up around 20% of exports, but it would have been a start.

Despite repeated commitments to consult on that during their term in office, they never did. Obviously our Government have committed to a circular economy, but there does not seem to have been anything specifically said on plastic waste exports either in our manifesto or in subsequent statements from Ministers. I am sure you would agree that we need to tackle mismanagement of plastic waste and boost our own domestic recycling sector as well. What is your position on that issue of exports?

Emma Hardy: Let me take that and give it to Minister Creagh because she is responsible for the Circular Economy Taskforce and I would not want to misrepresent her. I will ask her a little about the plastic waste exports and if that is something she is considering with the circular economy, then I can make sure the Committee has a proper answer from the right person, if that is all right?

Chair: Thank you for that. It would be appreciated. Jayne, you wanted to come in?

Q120 Jayne Kirkham: Just very quickly to say that I had some correspondence from a witness at our last evidence session who went with Greenpeace to the conference and was very complimentary about the UK delegation's tireless efforts throughout the negotiations. I just wanted to pass that on. He mentioned that the major divergence between the ambitious countries was about finance. He thought that was obviously something that the UK delegation could maybe work with other northern countries on before the next opportunity to talk about these



HOUSE OF COMMONS

things, but I wanted to pass on that positive message.

Emma Hardy: Thank you. The UK delegation was really excellent and there were a number of different areas where they were strong: plastic production was one, as was chemicals of concern; there was a whole range. You are quite right to point out that if we are going to achieve what we really want to here—the Global Plastics Treaty—we need to be talking to other countries about where compromises could be made and what landing zone would be appropriate ahead of any other formal negotiation. I am still completely committed to trying to achieve something, so we will keep going.

Chair: Just finally on that, actually, I find myself in a WhatsApp group of international parliamentarians curated by Philippe Bolo from the Assemblée Nationale. Again, across the whole range of countries that are represented in that group, there is a lot of praise for the UK representation. I am sure that if giving up were an option we could consider it, but it is not, so do not.

That is one point of genuine consensus on which we can: that the Committee and the Government are completely aligned on this. Minister, thank you very much indeed for your attendance and David, likewise thank you. We are out of time again I am afraid, but we appreciate your attendance and co-operation. We will follow up the various points in correspondence, but for today I close this meeting.