

Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee

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

Tuesday 24 March 2026

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Members present: Alistair Carmichael (Chair); Charlie Dewhurst; Sarah Dyke; Terry Jermy; Josh Newbury; Jenny Riddell-Carpenter; Tim Roca; Henry Tufnell.

Questions 121 - 161

Witnesses

I: Mary Creagh CBE MP, Minister for Nature, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs; Sally Randall, Director General - Environment Group, DEFRA; Reverend James A Cruddas OBE MCMi FRSA, Deputy Director, Waste and Recycling, DEFRA.

Written evidence from witnesses:

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

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Mary Creagh, Sally Randall and Reverend James A Cruddas.

Chair: We are going to move on from the land use questioning to the questioning around the circular economy taskforce plans and targets. Sally, you can pour yourself a glass of water, and James, this is where you earn your corn.

Q121 **Terry Jermy:** Mary, I know the circular economy is something you are particularly passionate about and you have been doing some great work on this in the last few months, so thank you for that. We noted as a Committee that the circular economy strategy has been renamed as a growth plan; could you just talk us through what the practical implications of that actually are?

Mary Creagh: We are trying to make the labelling a bit clearer on the tin: do what it says on the tin. There are a lot of strategies and, "Okay you have a plan, but what does it do?" When we went away and thought about it, we thought that actually this is part of our resilience story, this is part of our more efficient, more effective economy story, and this is about having a more materials-resilient economy. This has been another massive 18-month exercise, co-produced and independently run with the support of our very brilliant officials here. James has done a magnificent job on that.

It is about a transition; we are back to the bit about the upland farmers changing. The economy is changing—faster than we would like—with a lot of external shocks that we might prefer not to have. This is about resource efficiency, really putting an end to the waste economy, and getting away from linear to a more circular economy. This is about creating jobs and growth in every nation and region of the country and really stepping up on moving away from the recycling bins argument, which is where policy has been stuck with not much progress, frankly, for a decade, to a kind of, "No, we have to just think bigger, think differently," and really have massive behaviour change.

Q122 **Terry Jermy:** To get that behaviour change, we need buy-in from multi-stakeholders. Thinking about the work of the circular economy taskforce, could you explain the work that has gone on involving industry, in particular major producers, and how they have contributed to the process?

Mary Creagh: Yes, sure. I have some lines here. We have held workshops on battery regulations to achieve greater circularities in battery supply chains through higher and better quality of recycling of battery materials. We know that lithium batteries thrown away into the household waste are causing dozens of fires each month and costing us a fortune. We have to do better at that. We have banned the single use vapes; that was one of the first actions I took great delight in doing as a Minister. There is enough lithium in them to create 5,000 batteries for an



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electric vehicle. There is an absolutely astonishing amount of waste in them.

We have published guidance with the mayoral strategic authorities to get them to embed circular economy approaches. I have been really impressed with Sadiq Khan's approach to embodied carbon in buildings: not the operational carbon of how much the light bulb costs, but the embodied carbon of how much steel and cement are in the building. Instead of just knocking it down, can we refit and refurbish it from the inside? I was talking to a German glass recycler at one of the climate COPs in Azerbaijan, and I said, "Ooh, do you have a plant in the UK?" He said, "Yes, but only in London." I thought, "That's because we're recycling the glass out of London's construction industry." He is based here, but he is not based in Birmingham or Manchester because they do not have the same rules. How can we get that good practice out? Do you want to come in on that, James?

Reverend Cruddas: I would like to just add a little to that. The circular economy taskforce comprises 20 or so people drawn from business, academia and a wide range of non-governmental organisations. The members have led consultation events and stakeholder events with numerous businesses. In fact, they have reached over 1,000 stakeholders in the course of their work. It is detailed, really important work. That listening exercise has proven very valuable because it has garnered a lot of support for their work.

Q123 **Terry Jermy:** Are you happy to share details of who is on the taskforce with the Committee, so that we can have an insight?

Mary Creagh: It is all on the website, yes.

Q124 **Terry Jermy:** Are there stakeholders that you would want engagement to be better with? Where are the opportunities to do more?

Mary Creagh: Everyone has really shown up for this. I want to say some more things about it though, first. We are going to update the Government Buying Standards because Government are the biggest purchaser of goods and services in the country. If we ask central Departments and their arm's length bodies to use a single set of modern environmental requirements that fully embed circular economy principles in procurement, then that is quite exciting because that starts to shift the dial and shift behaviour across Government.

We have some really great civil servants working across Government on this from the Ministry of Defence and Ministry of Justice, which are where some of the biggest carbon and material footprints are. We have to recycle some very large ships, and so how are we going to do that? What are we going to do with these retired nuclear submarines? We have to break them down; we have to do that properly. We have also set up the Circular Economy Finance Group, a coalition of the UK and Dutch Governments and leading lending banks. That is focused on breaking



down barriers for the infrastructure and innovation we need for a waste-free economy. The Dutch are quite a lot further ahead of us in some aspects of this; they are much more bold on their construction materials, for example.

We have looked at every area of the economy: agri-food, built environment, chemicals and plastics, electrical and electronic equipment, and textiles, which obviously I did my Select Committee report on back in 2018, so there is some unfinished business there. There is also transport: all those tyres being recycled and potentially sometimes catching fire; electric vehicles and batteries: what can we do with them at the end of their life? These are big. This is a massive shift.

Q125 Terry Jermy: We heard earlier about the importance of data, and it is fair to say that DEFRA acknowledges limitations on data, particularly for non-household waste. Is there a concern around how the taskforce can establish new targets and tactics if we are not actually fully understanding the scale of the problems? How reliant are we on the data, and how accurate is it? It is going to be informing the work as we move forward.

Reverend Cruddas: There are data gaps that the taskforce has identified. What we intend is that, as part of it, we clearly identify what those gaps are and how we would plug those gaps in the future. What we can say is that the work of the taskforce has been predicated on a strong evidence base, and its recommendations are very much grounded in the evidence that we have.

Q126 Terry Jermy: In which areas of data are you most concerned about reliability?

Reverend Cruddas: You mentioned non-household waste; is that what you are driving at?

Q127 Terry Jermy: I would like to know if there are any others, but I am particularly concerned about non-household waste. If we are shaping policy, I want to have certainty in the data we are gathering. If you are acknowledging that perhaps it might not be as robust as it could be, where are the areas that are most concerning?

Mary Creagh: Can I say something on vapes? I am not sure that we know how many vapes are put on to the market, for example. There might be some issues with vapes. When I am setting targets for recycling vapes, the legitimate operators are worried about the illegitimate operators. There is a job of work to do there. They are all meant to have takeback schemes. If you are buying your vape from a shop that does not have a takeback scheme, you need to ask some questions. We all need to become citizen data gatherers. We have given Trading Standards £10 million to go in and tackle the single use vape ban. It has found some very, very interesting things in some vape shops, is all I will say.

Q128 Chair: Just to go back to the circular economy taskforce for a second, it



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seems to be a little heavy on professors and a little light on producers. Is that a fair comment?

Mary Creagh: At the top, you have to set the big theory of change and the big economic picture. You are talking about Paul Ekins—

Chair: The people who will be delivering that—

Mary Creagh: Each segment of the economy has had its own working group.

Q129 **Chair:** We do not need to persuade the professors. There is a job of work to be done persuading the likes of Coca-Cola. I think it was Unilever that refused to come to the Select Committee when we had our session on plastic pollution. They were all busy. They had all gone to India for the day, I think. Would it not help buy in some big producers if you had them in there?

Mary Creagh: I am surprised at Unilever because under Paul Polman, it was one of the leaders in terms of—

Chair: I am pretty sure it was Unilever.

Mary Creagh: I am surprised. When we banned microbeads, we had a lot of large companies that did not want to appear, but we got them there in the end. James and I have had a long Socratic dialogue over 18 months on this. Things that we thought were going to be easy at the beginning turned out to be a bit hard, and things that we thought were going to be hard turned out to be easier than we thought. For example, on textiles, because of the work that had already been done in this House under my previous Committee, the British Fashion Council and the stakeholders were all ready for a textiles EPR. They were quite enthusiastic. They had designed one already, so they said, "Yes, we are good to go. Here's one we made earlier." That was not necessarily—

Reverend Cruddas: I would like to just to expand on that. As you say, Minister, in certain sectors such as textiles, we have strong support from across the sector for intervention by Government. In many other sectors, we have engaged very much with the producer community and had good dialogue in the development of the work of the taskforce. The taskforce itself has deliberately gone out to seek views, and we continue to engage with industry at all levels. While I would not want to comment on specific firms—the ones you mentioned, for example—some are leading voices in the development of many of the policies that come as a precursor to the circular economy strategy. There are firms that are great champions of our deposit return scheme, for example.

Mary Creagh: Coca-Cola is one of them.

Chair: We will move on to the circular economy growth plan.

Q130 **Henry Tufnell:** I wanted to start on the 2024 statutory target because



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the current reforms are expected to achieve just over a third of the reduction in residual waste, if you are going to meet that 2024 target from the—

Mary Creagh: Do you mean 2034?

Henry Tufnell: No. Sorry, in the 2025—

Mary Creagh: In the EIP.

Q131 **Henry Tufnell:** There are so many different moving parts, are there not? Your revised EIP has a 2024 statutory target. I wanted to ask whether in view of that—

Mary Creagh: Do you mean 2042 or 2035?

Q132 **Henry Tufnell:** No, the 2042 statutory target to reduce residual waste, excluding major mineral waste.

Mary Creagh: You said 2024.

Henry Tufnell: Oh, did I say 2024? Oh, dear. There we go—my brain is somewhere else today, but maybe that is good.

Mary Creagh: We were just thinking, “Whatever that was, we missed it, and it’s not my fault.”

Reverend Cruddas: We know the target now.

Q133 **Henry Tufnell:** We will get there in the end. I wanted to ask, in view of that, with the growth plan, how much will you focus on developing repair and reuse systems? They are quite challenging to implement. We have heard the trials from supermarkets, in terms of the scalability of it. People’s attitudes are also a bit sticky, and obviously repairing electrical goods can be expensive.

Mary Creagh: Let me talk about the 2042 target, which is set in statute from under the previous Government, and our 2035 target for household waste and recycling. That target is essentially to take it up from roughly 44%, which is where it has stagnated for the last decade, right the way up to 65% by 2035. That is going to be done through our simpler recycling reform. Policy creates the change; it does not happen on a linear line; it is not a neat graph. It is going to be a step change, we hope. It will take two or three years for simpler recycling to bed in. On the 2042 target, you are right: what is the longer-term shift for the economy?

Q134 **Henry Tufnell:** The key thing is that the National Audit Office highlighted that despite reducing pollution, in effect, there is a lack of a clear vision for the waste at source point. That being a problem within—

Reverend Cruddas: As the Minister said, the targets are essentially a step change. Between now and the end of the Parliament, there is a collection of packaging reforms—simpler recycling, the deposit return



scheme, and the packaging extended producer responsibility regime—that get you part of the way there on the residual waste arising target. It is designed to deliver what the environmental improvement plan says we will deliver by 2030. The 2025 target sets out where we will get to by 2030, and that is what the collection of packaging reforms gets you. Other interventions from the circular economy taskforce and the growth plan will drive further reductions in residual waste arising.

On your point about driving up reuse and repair, there are a couple of things we can probably send more detailed notes on, but there are examples already operating. There is the Suez Renew Hub in Greater Manchester, where large-scale renew and repair is done for the population of Greater Manchester. People bring things to their household waste recycling centres that can be reused, recycled and repurposed. They are taken in, in bulk, and then resold at affordable prices in community shops. The Minister saw that in action very recently. Another example—you were talking about the difficulty of this in consumer attitudes—is that Screwfix's reuse and repair business of tools is a growing area of its business. I do not have the data in front of me, but it is—

Q135 Henry Tufnell: What about repairability requirements? That is something the EU is looking into. It is legislating for it.

Reverend Cruddas: It is.

Mary Creagh: Yes, and we are very keen to learn from that. For example, when I had my extended gap year, I did some work with Primark. It was looking at not the repairability, but much more the longevity of the clothing that it was doing. I do not want to say how many years the T-shirt would last, but it would last X number of washes or Y number of years, depending on the number of times you washed and wore it.

Clothes that last longer is quite a change to the textile business models, which are driven by fast fashion—Instagram drops; buying new things every month; buying things, wearing them for a photo, then sending them back. There is all sorts of stuff going on in the textiles industry. It is a great part of Britain's fashion, culture and creative story, but we need to bring it around to being more sustainable. There is some really good work being done on sustainability and repairability. You can go into Uniqlo now and get your jeans repaired. There are some repair things happening.

The difficulty we have is around just high street repairs: people knowing how to sew on a button themselves, knowing that your local dry cleaner may have a repair service, knowing that things that may be broken can be repaired, and the financials of it. I had a really nice coat with a zip that broke. It was £1 an inch for the zip. If you have a 24-inch zip, it is 25 quid. The maths does not work out on a 50-quid coat, but it would work out on a £500 coat.



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What are the labour costs? What is the industry doing behind that, through our brilliant charity retail sector, to take the clothes that we are no longer using and give them a second life? That could be automotive cleaning costs, or export to countries such as Pakistan or Ghana, for resale in those countries where it is a valued and thriving part of their industrial landscape. But you are right—we have the highest unworn wardrobe of any European country. It is really bad.

Q136 Henry Tufnell: Is a digital product passport something that could be helpful?

Mary Creagh: We are looking at what the EU is doing in this area, as you would expect, as part of our EU alignment to make cross-border trade easier. We are not going to impose costs on UK producers that are then duplicated with EU costs. We are trying to do labelling, packaging and all those things together in lockstep to enable that cross-border trade to continue. It is not about loading regulation on to producers, but actually smarter regulation.

Q137 Henry Tufnell: I do not want to dwell too much on the packaging reforms but, in the light of how long they have taken to be implemented—six years—will there be further reforms for the six priority sectors of the circular economy taskforce?

Mary Creagh: I hope so; we have not done it as a plan to gather dust on the shelf. As I said at the top, it is about change. We need a more resilient economy, and this is how we achieve both resilience and our carbon budget.

Q138 Henry Tufnell: Are there any short-term priorities?

Mary Creagh: I cannot prejudge the announcements. I have personal favourites. That is a subject of ongoing discussion.

Q139 Henry Tufnell: I want to ask about the agri-food circular economy plan and the scope of it.

Mary Creagh: This year we did a £15 million farm surplus fund. We have given that out as a one-year thing to tackle avoidable on-farm food waste. That has taught us some very useful things. That has mainly gone out in capital grants to FareShare, the Felix Project, City Harvest over in Ealing, and Urban Goodies up in the north-west, in Manchester and Liverpool. It has gone out to freezer and chiller lorries and big freezers so that they can store more food.

That has taught us that we are in competition with anaerobic digestion for diverting this on-farm food waste, because farmers can get X pounds per tonne for anaerobic digestion, and we would like to give it to people. It has revealed some DEFRA silos that we were talking about earlier: policy points in one direction here and another direction there. We are reflecting on that, and we are doing an evaluation on that.



Of course, the value of that funding lives on in those grants, in the vans and the fridges, which are now able to take meat, in particular. I know from my work in my gap years about storing meat-based products that often there are a lot of tins, and actually it is really important that we can store meat. We are funding research projects looking at the scale of on-farm surplus, and the factors that influence farmers dealing with surplus produce. That will help us design our interventions in the future. We also want to foster innovation in farming, cut waste, and guarantee affordable, sustainably produced and packaged foods for everybody. I am really glad to see that this is the first year when demand for food bank use has actually fallen, which is a good direction of travel.

Q140 Henry Tufnell: I have two quick points. First, regarding plastics on farms: there are tree guards and seed coatings, which are often not recycled. Secondly, fishing gear: 13,000 tonnes of fishing gear is wasted each year. Is that on your radar in respect of the—

Mary Creagh: I am assured we no longer use plastic tree guards in Forestry England. Our national forestry service does not do that. There are biodegradable alternatives available, and part of that 10-year grant is about removing those tree guards. They should not be just left in the landscape. It is being paid to go along in year three or year five and take them out. That is the first thing. The ghost fishing gear is an international problem. I am not the Fisheries Minister, so I do not know what we are doing on that. I am sorry; we will have to write to you.

Chair: We could start by banning gillnetting on an industrial scale, but that is for another day.

Q141 Tim Roca: All the work going on around the circular economy, nature, waste and repairability is really exciting. In Macclesfield, it is really important to lots of my residents. We have the Macc Repair Café; I am sure others have similar organisations. We have zero waste shopping at Scoop and Scales. It really is appreciated.

On packaging, it is fair to say that when you arrived in the Department, the previous Government had not left it in a particularly good place. The NAO was scathing about where they had got to with their 2018 strategy. There were questions about metrics, leadership and so on. What have you done to really get the Department on track?

Mary Creagh: I would not say it is me, but I would say it is my brilliant official, Emma Bourne, who has now gone on to lead our work as director general on EU Reset and Trade. I wanted to move really quickly on all this, so we did the three big statutory instruments that had been in flight on extended producer responsibility: the deposit return scheme, simpler recycling, which is coming in on 1 April—there is an argument about 31 March versus 1 April— and the mandatory food waste collection that is part of that. Those are the three legs on the collection and packaging reform stool that are going to really turn the dial and help us achieve our targets.



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We have done the single use vapes ban. We have also made changes to the WEEE regulations by introducing a new category of electrical equipment for vapes because they were classed as toys, which I find extraordinary. Yes, vapes as toys—that tells you where all the problems start. The costs of managing vapes at end of life is now firmly on the producers. We have also brought in a statutory instrument that says the online marketplaces—the Amazons and eBays of this world—that are putting electrical equipment on the market now have to pay for their collection as well. They are now brought into the Packaging Recovery Note scheme.

All that is necessary but not sufficient. I am constantly doing what I call my Freddie Mercury act with officials—I want it all and I want it now. We have to go further; we have to go faster. I am very impatient for change in this space. As you say, this started when I was the Select Committee Chair in 2018. I am the Minister seven years later and nothing has happened. This is not how it is supposed to be.

Q142 Tim Roca: Are you confident that the Department is now going in the right direction? The NAO specifically called out delivery plans and leadership.

Mary Creagh: Those packaging reforms are big. They are big scale. It was a red-rated project when we came in; it is now an amber-rated project. We will see when it reaches green. It is still in flight, it is still complex, it is still whole economy change, and change is hard. But this is change that is really worthwhile.

On food waste, I remember the *Daily Mail's* headline saying, "Slop bucket in every kitchen" back in 2010. I remember thinking, "Most people quite like a bit of composting." Where food waste collections are in, people are happy. There will be a bit of discussion and debate in local authorities such as mine in Coventry where we have not had food waste collection, but actually most people want to do their bit. When you tell them that this is creating green gas, green electricity and digestate for farmers at a time when fertiliser prices are going through the roof, people will step up and really want to do their bit.

Q143 Tim Roca: I shall turn to EPR now. *The Grocer* has reported on a lot of the issues the producers faced, including thousands of firms being charged multiple times. PackUK had contacted 2,000 businesses about late payments and threatened extra fees, and it turned out that the majority of them actually were on track with their payments. The IT infrastructure has had a lot of criticism. What do you say to those criticisms so far of how it has been rolled out?

Mary Creagh: In early December, PackUK—the scheme administrator—was due to collect the first direct debit from producers under pEPR. There was a technical issue with the direct debit scheme, and certain businesses saw their direct debit payments collected more than once. As soon as they and I were alerted to the issue, an incident response



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happened: we contacted affected producers; we halted further erroneous payments where that was possible; and we worked with service providers—the digital systems providers—around the clock to process refunds. About 484 businesses were impacted, which is 11% of total producers obligated under the scheme. It was not everybody; it was a little more than 10%.

It was an absolute priority for us; I remember it vividly. We had a range of interim support measures to help businesses manage cash flow. It was in the pre-Christmas trading period, so businesses were generally quite cash rich at the time. We did regular updates to the various compliance schemes and trade associations. We extended our computer support desk hours with additional weekend opening. Where duplicate payments were taken, we took the decision to refund, and PackUK got those refunds out of the door within 72 hours. I would like to place on record my gratitude to those officials who worked around the clock to make sure that that was appropriately dealt with.

Q144 Tim Roca: In February, PackUK reported quite a significant shortfall in revenues. Do you know why the Department did not anticipate such a shortfall?

Mary Creagh: Why could we not see the future? We are back to “change is hard.” On this, we have decided that there will be no change to disposal fees for the year one EPR. The fees remain as outlined in the notices of liability that we issued in October. We have listened carefully to the concerns that industry raised on this, and we recognise the pressures that it is currently under. That is why we have stepped in with this extra support. That is important because the scheme is bedding in, and it ensures that this is money that is going straight through to local authorities to fund these new household collections.

This is the principle: you put it on the market, you pay for its clean-up. It is a big psychological change for packaging producers. We have done that as an exceptional measure on the scheme’s introduction, and it should not be viewed as a precedent. This is a one-off intervention. We are looking at what we need to do to avoid such shortfalls in the future. There is a piece of work going on that asks how this happened; then there will be a piece of work once we have that as to what needs to change so it does not happen again.

Q145 Tim Roca: There is quite a live debate, is there not, from producers who would like to see a producer-led body take on more of these responsibilities, but then the LGA was quite critical of that idea?

Mary Creagh: We have announced it today or yesterday? The PRO. It was yesterday. There is a producer-led body, I cannot remember what it is called now, the PRO, but we announced that yesterday. There will be an industry-led body managing this going forwards.

Q146 Tim Roca: Will it be managing the whole process?



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Sally Randall: It will take on some functions of PackUK. Some functions of PackUK have to be hosted within Government: they are sovereign functions and they must be carried out by Government. That is both to do with accounting rules but also reflecting—as you mentioned—the concerns of local authorities that some functions are held by the Government. We hold that on behalf of the four nations that are running the scheme collectively.

But where those functions are about working with industry, those aspects of the scheme will be run in future by UK Packaging PRO, which is the Producer Responsibility Organisation announced yesterday. That will ensure that there is really significant industry input where it is appropriate, while maintaining the sovereign functions within Government.

Q147 **Tim Roca:** What was the concern of the LGA about moving responsibilities to a producer-led body?

Sally Randall: It wants to make sure that where PackUK is making judgments about whether local authorities are delivering an efficient and effective service, which is part of its job, that is done fairly and transparently. We are obviously committed to doing that.

Q148 **Tim Roca:** There are reports of companies setting up smaller companies to basically find a loophole to get around some responsibilities. How are you reacting to that?

Mary Creagh: Not best pleased. We are going to look at some behaviours and work out what to do about them.

Q149 **Tim Roca:** Obviously, the food supply chain is facing fees for EPR, the deposit return scheme and more reporting requirements. In 2024, DEFRA estimated the impact on food prices would be about 91p per week per household. Is that a figure that you are still comfortable with?

Mary Creagh: Yes.

Q150 **Tim Roca:** Food inflation has outstripped headline inflation for many, many years—several of the last years. It is mostly climate change that is contributing to food inflation. Do you not think this tops it up in an unfair way, if you see what I mean?

Mary Creagh: No. We have no evidence to indicate that that has changed.

Chair: This is the final round of questions on the subject of waste collection and recycling infrastructure.

Q151 **Jenny Riddell-Carpenter:** Standardised collections for household waste and recycling is being rolled out this month, but it has been highlighted that some councils are just not meeting the target, particularly for food waste. Are you working to support councils? If so, how are you addressing any delays? How long would you expect improvements to



take?

Mary Creagh: We know that two-thirds of local authorities are ready to meet the food waste collection requirements by the end of March—the end of this week. That is good news, and we know that they all want to do it. For example, Coventry is going to roll it out in September because there are some issues with terraced houses and the proliferation of bins on streets and what that is all going to look like. There was some uncertainty and scepticism from local government about, “Is this money real?” There was a bit of, “Is this really going to happen? We’re not going to commit to things.” They have already had over—how many millions? Some £300-odd million?

Sally Randall: I think that is about right, but we can check.

Reverend Cruddas: It is £340 million.

Mary Creagh: Some £340 million already to help them with this transition. It is not like we are saying, “It all starts tomorrow and you have to fund it yourselves.” They have had money. There are some logistical challenges around the number of vehicles and bins, and there is a big bulge in the system, as you would expect with any big changeover. Of course, there is also the perennial issue of flats above shops and people in tower blocks. There are things such as shutting up the waste chutes, where people in tower blocks have chucked their waste out in a black bin from time immemorial. That is quite a big behaviour change there.

Then there are flats above shops where you may have commercial waste collections coming out and people have just been putting their household waste out with the commercial collections. Now we are saying, “We need you to put your food waste here and your recycling here, and this is not for commercial waste.” There is quite a big education and comms piece that lots of local authorities are doing.

We have agreed with 31 local authorities to roll out food waste services after this date because they have long-term service contracts where breaking those contracts would not be good value for the taxpayer. They are the exceptions. But generally, this is going to be quite a big step change in both carbon reduction and some green gas and green electricity production through AD.

Reverend Cruddas: With support to local authorities directly, we have a change network that is enabling those local authorities that are already advanced in this to support those local authorities that are introducing the change now.

Q152 **Jenny Riddell-Carpenter:** Did you say it is two-thirds by the end of this month?

Mary Creagh: Yes.



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Q153 Jenny Riddell-Carpenter: Then there are some local authorities that are locked into quite long-term contracts. By what period are you estimating 100% to be reached?

Mary Creagh: I did regional news on this in the west midlands. All the west midlands authorities will be compliant by the end of the year.

Q154 Jenny Riddell-Carpenter: Even those with long-term contracts?

Mary Creagh: There are no long-term contracts in the west midlands. That is a Manchester issue, where there are some longer contracts that are a bit harder. North Yorkshire is the last one, from memory.

Q155 Jenny Riddell-Carpenter: Excellent. The UK nations are taking different approaches to waste collections and deposit return schemes. Do you anticipate there being more issues across use case internal markets? I mean things such as different standards of local authority collections and so on.

Mary Creagh: On deposit return schemes, I think the Welsh Government have said they are going to be part of our scheme.

Reverend Cruddas: I think the position in Wales is still under discussion by Wales. What we can say this morning is that we have appointed the Deposit Management Organisation to deliver the deposit return scheme in Northern Ireland, Scotland and England.

Q156 Jenny Riddell-Carpenter: Not Wales?

Reverend Cruddas: Not Wales.

Q157 Jenny Riddell-Carpenter: Despite ongoing reforms, it was estimated last year that the UK's reprocessing capacity had fallen by 260,000 tonnes over an 18-month period. To what extent will this undermine waste collection reforms? How will DEFRA kick-start investment in the sector? Specifically, why are the Government against escalating the 30% recycled plastic content threshold for plastic packaging?

Mary Creagh: We published our, *Recycling Infrastructure Capacity Analysis* with WRAP in February 2025, showing local authorities and investors where we are going to need additional recycling capacity and encouraging them to engage with the National Wealth Fund to fill those gaps. We estimate that these collection and packaging reforms are going to unlock £10 billion in funding and 25,000 green jobs over the next 10 years. That is what the industry estimates. That is in recycling capacity.

We are aware that some plants have closed. That is what happens when fossil fuels are cheap. There is a paradox about what is going on in the global situation, is there not? We do not yet have sufficient infrastructure to process all simpler recycling materials, but we are actively supporting private investment to close that recycling gap and develop the reprocessing capacity that we need at home, so we are not reliant on imported materials. On the 30%, yes; what would you like to say, Sally?



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Sally Randall: We keep it under review. We are conscious of the change load on the packaging industry. We are pushing through some really big reforms at the moment, but we keep all that under review.

Q158 **Josh Newbury:** I would like to ask something briefly on the rollout of mandatory food waste collections. I am conscious that in Staffordshire we have had only one local authority—Newcastle-under-Lyme—that has had these collections for a long time. I remember when I was an environment cabinet member, it told us it had never even reached 33% take-up. It hovered generally around a quarter. As a local authority it carried on with those collections only because it was a political priority. It certainly was not delivering value for money in terms of the amount of food waste it was actually collecting. As you said, this is obviously a huge culture change for a lot of households across the country.

In Northern Ireland, I am aware that when it introduced food waste, it eventually said, “If you continue to put food waste in your general waste, we will treat it as contamination; we won’t collect it.” How are we going to get to a point where we actually get good uptake of this service? Most of the local authorities that have had it, particularly in more deprived areas, have never really had the levels that you would hope for.

Mary Creagh: It is about normalisation and communication. We all know that local authority services have been absolutely stripped over the last 16 years. We know that it is a case of: if you want to talk to people, do this type of comm stuff; it is classed as revenue, not capital; if your budget is going on adult social care and children’s social care, which is about 80% of most councils’ budgets, then the space for parks, green space, fly-tipping, leisure and so on is squeezed. Those of us who have been local councillors have watched that and despaired at it.

There is £78 billion of investment going into local authorities to enable them to listen to people’s priorities about cleaning up, fly-tipping—another one of my obsessions—and waste crime: we published our waste crime action plan last week. The storytelling is really important. Most food waste occurs in our homes. It occurs when students look at best before dates and think they are going to die if they drink that pint of milk, whereas we know just stick it in your tea; if it goes into curdles then it is probably not safe, but you can make bread and scones out of it. It is about education.

I feel like we have lost some storytelling. We have lost some confidence in our own ability to process food because of the growing out-of-home market, the growth of delivery services—all that. There has been a deskilling around food and household management. None of this is in the brief, by the way; that is just what I think. Turning that around is about the removal of some best before dates on packaging: that is important and a good thing, particularly on fruit and veg. Trust your own instincts: we have done a lot of work with WRAP on just getting people to feel more confident. What do you do with a banana that goes black? Stick it in the



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freezer, mush it up into a smoothie. Nobody even notices. It is about having the confidence to use freezers and so on more widely.

Most of that is happening in our home. The average home is spending £1,000 a year on food that goes in the bin. We have a big job of work to do in the home to prevent it. All the tea bags, banana peels, potato skins, or whatever that you do not want, need to go to anaerobic digestion. Then there is the food and manufacturing industry, which is incredibly efficient, but if you are doing millions of litres of milk a day then half a percent of that is still a lot of waste. We need to look with industry at what it can do to tackle its own waste as well. We have some thoughts on how we might do that.

Q159 Josh Newbury: You are not looking at fines or saying, "We won't collect your general waste if you refuse to use the food waste service"?

Mary Creagh: That is for local authorities to do. It is devolved down to them to do what they think will work best in their areas. I know in Coventry there is a bit of a sticker thing that says, "Oops, you've put the wrong things in this bin." It is not, "You're very bad and stupid," it is, "Oops, you've made a mistake." It is actually working with people to help them understand what to put in. It is particularly needed in cities with large student populations, or newly arrived communities where there may be a black bin bag tradition in their home countries.

Q160 Chair: Mary, you mentioned the waste crime action plan and I have just a couple of very quick points that maybe you could clear up. The plan states that landowners should be responsible for clearing illegal waste sites on their land. If they have not been responsible for the waste being there in the first place, how does that come under the "polluter pays" principle? They are not the polluter; they are the victim of the waste crime, are they not?

Mary Creagh: Understood. We are looking at the remediation of those very large-scale illegal waste sites and developing a landfill tax rebate scheme with local authorities. We are looking to work with the insurance industry to explore new insurance models to protect farmers, businesses and landowners from bearing the cost of waste dumped illegally on their land.

However, we have serious organised crime groups in this business and the issue of land ownership is often disputed on some big sites. We do not want to create a moral hazard where the taxpayer steps in for clean-up and then the landowner miraculously reappears and sells it off for housing. It is not for taxpayers to enable somebody to profit from a cleaned-up site. We have to exhaust all available avenues, particularly on those very large sites such as Hoad's Wood where we simply could not establish land ownership because it had been parcelled off and sold to lots and lots of different people. I cannot go too much into it; I will get told off.



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Q161 **Chair:** For the more straightforward cases of somebody with land having rubbish tipped on it, those are not the people you are going after?

Mary Creagh: No, not at all. That is where we are trying to develop the insurance. They are businesses, so it should be an insurable risk. It should be without massive excesses.

Chair: That covers all the areas we have for today.

Mary Creagh: Oh, great.

Chair: We are letting you get away a minute early. Thank you all for your attendance and your engagement. We will doubtless return to this in the future. For the moment, that concludes our proceedings today.