

Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee

Oral evidence: Food waste in England, HC 429

Wednesday 22 March 2017

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Members present: Neil Parish (Chair); Chris Davies; Jim Fitzpatrick; Simon Hart; Kerry McCarthy; Dr Paul Monaghan; Rebecca Pow; Ms Margaret Ritchie; and David Simpson.

Questions 509 - 527

Witnesses

I: Dr Thérèse Coffey, Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for the Environment and Rural Life Opportunities, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs; Chris Preston, Deputy Director for Waste and Recycling, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs.

Written evidence from witnesses:

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

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Dr Thérèse Coffey and Chris Preston.

Q509 **Chair:** Minister, you had best introduce yourself for the record, although we know who you are.

Dr Coffey: I am Thérèse Coffey, Parliamentary Under Secretary of State. Can I introduce Chris Preston, who is deputy director for waste and recycling?

Q510 **Chair:** Welcome. Courtauld 2025 has a target to reduce food and drink waste in the UK by 20% by 2025. Do you respond to the concerns that it is not ambitious enough, given the UN's sustainable development goal of reducing food waste by half by 2030?

Dr Coffey: Courtauld 2025 and the SDG are on slightly different parameters. Courtauld builds on what we had before, with signatories signing up to it. This relates to total food waste, whereas I think I am right in saying that the sustainable development goal is focused not on total food, but more focused on household and retail food waste. As a consequence, we think that the sustainable development goal 12.3 is achievable. We are expecting to use our 2007 baseline, because in effect that is when the Government started looking at this, measuring it and so on. That is what we will be working towards.

Q511 **Chair:** It is not always in your remit, Minister, but we have found when taking evidence and going around is that, for many of the local authorities, their contract may be five to 10 years. Therefore, if you want to collect food waste separately or to change these things, it takes a very long time for change to happen. Do you have any ideas on that?

Dr Coffey: It can do. I attended part of a meeting of a consistency advisory group on Monday, and I was slightly disappointed to hear that one of the councils, which is very limited in what it takes on recycling, had just signed an extension of its contract knowing that. That was disappointing. There is more that we can do working with our delivery partner, WRAP, and the LGA to see how we can do more on this. In terms of food waste, we know that the highest performing councils usually undertake a separate or combined food waste collection, but even some of the lowest performing try to do so. However, I think there is more that we can and need to do in the future.

Q512 **Chair:** I do not expect you to rule by decree, even if you would like to, but, seriously, what more can the Government do? Is it a case of giving the local authorities guidelines and expecting them to conform, or is there more the Government can do?

Dr Coffey: I am keen to take a somewhat more proactive approach than that, but fall shy of regulation. One of the things that I am clear on is that we do not want central Government mandating exactly the collection



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systems for each area. What we want to do more of, and what WRAP is doing, is to bring together consistency within each locality. It has about nine groups of areas, including some London boroughs, Staffordshire, Cumbria and so on.

That will hopefully lead to more councils having the ability to recycle more, and the costs of extending the system being more beneficial. I used to live in Hampshire, and I have already started that discussion to say, "Come on". I have lived in two boroughs in Hampshire and, in my view, there is more that can be done locally. I do not want to have to resort to regulation, to have sticks. We want to encourage good behaviour. We are working with industry to try to make it better.

Q513 Chair: It depends on whether you have any carrots or sticks that you can offer. Do you have carrots in the way of money or sticks in taking that money away?

Dr Coffey: I will not pretend that we have lots of money around; we do not. WRAP is a trusted partner by the industry in terms of how we can make it easier for households to recycle. This is a slightly sweeping statement, but one of my focuses at the moment has been to express my concern that we are telling people to stop recycling certain items that could technically be recycled because they cannot be handled by their particular council. We are, therefore, at risk of encouraging contradictory behaviour, and we need to sort out what can be recycled. That might be a technological challenge, but I do not want the tail wagging the dog. I will not name it, but one company does not encourage people to recycle what they can, just because its machine cannot sort out what black plastic is.

Q514 Rebecca Pow: Welcome, Minister. You have touched upon it a little bit, but, with the Government taking the voluntary approach, I wonder if you could explain why you think the voluntary approach will get us to our 20% target by 2025.

Dr Coffey: There are a number of things. One is on the household side, but we have seen good progress with businesses through the Courtauld approach and across its different elements. As a consequence, I do not see the point of regulating particularly businesses if they are making good, steady progress. We might need to have a slightly increased step change, but in some of the evidence that I have read you have seen a step change from some of the large retailers in what they are trying to do to be more proactive in this area.

Chris Preston: That is right. If a voluntary approach is working, that is the way you should go. The Government have shown in the past that, where it is necessary to regulate to change behaviour or to drive a particular set of activities, they have regulated. Carrier bag charges have been used to change behaviour in that way.

Q515 Rebecca Pow: The Government intervened with the carrier bag charge, and behaviour did not change until they did so. We have only eight years



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to get to the 20% target. Do you think we will make it, Minister?

Dr Coffey: I am confident about what we have put in place. The programmes are underway and we should make good progress through them. I am hopeful, keen and confident. I won't say that my confidence level is 100%, but I am keen that we make progress towards that. That is why we are pulling different levers to try to make it happen. The plastic bag charge was a case where there was a readily available substitute. Trying to get people to change behaviour is an ongoing challenge, but I am clear that we need to keep focused on households as the main way, and using whatever lever we can to get that change. A lot of that will be done through retailers, but also through the local councils.

Q516 **Rebecca Pow:** Why have the Government not introduced mandatory targets for waste recycling? Wales, for example, has set mandatory targets.

Dr Coffey: It has, and I recognise that it has made that decision. You can see how councils have responded to it. Again, I would rather work with the councils where we have the biggest challenges and shortfalls, to see what more we can do. I do not know if I can give too much detail, but we are looking at some issues. The particular issue that we have is on urban recycling—not exclusively, but particularly urban. We have a greater proportion of our population in urban areas. Across the British-Irish Council, which comprises the Crown territories, the Republic of Ireland and the four nations of the UK, we have commissioned research on how to improve urban recycling, particularly in flats. I hope to be working with two housing associations specifically, to pilot some new ideas on how we get that step change in densely populated areas.

Q517 **Rebecca Pow:** Would you say that the Welsh system is working well, after having brought in a mandatory target?

Dr Coffey: It is certainly working well for their set-up and their communities, but we are quite a different nation in the composition of our communities in England.

Q518 **Rebecca Pow:** Do you mean more urban? Is that the point you are trying to make?

Dr Coffey: Yes.

Q519 **Chair:** Will you be monitoring the situation in Wales, to see whether it is more relevant to England in the future and whether the compulsory system is working? Will you follow that?

Dr Coffey: I am not currently pursuing the policy agenda of compulsory. If I was to take a step back from all these recycling targets, the biggest learning I have had since becoming a Minister is how much of our recycling is actually garden waste. Whether the waste is wet or not when it is collected can make a massive difference. That makes a huge difference. I am slightly concerned, and it is one of the big opportunities on leaving the European Union, to rethink this whole resource efficiency



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agenda and the role of recycling, reuse and recovery within it. I recognise that is not about food.

Q520 Jim Fitzpatrick: Minister and Mr Preston, good afternoon. Can I turn and ask you about consumer targets for Courtauld 2025? We are told that the findings from Courtauld phase 3, which had a target to reduce household waste by 5% between 2012 and 2015, were not only that the target was not met, but that there was an increase from 7 million to 7.3 million tonnes of waste. Those figures are only estimates, but have they been confirmed as accurate? What can you do to meet the 2025 targets, given that you are starting from the position that society is going in a different direction? That means more work to turn it around.

Chris Preston: On the household food waste targets, it is worth saying that there was a reduction from 2007 to 2012, but it is also true to say that those figures have stalled. More work needs to be done in the household sector to reduce food waste. We are working with WRAP and some of the big WRAP partners, like supermarkets, to look at ways that we can further reduce household food waste. Consumers are wasting something like £12 billion a year, so you clearly want to tackle that. That is the hardest area to tackle as well. Changing behaviour in people's homes is harder than working further back in the supply chain.

Q521 Jim Fitzpatrick: That is why I ask the question: how do you think you may be able to do that? As you described, between 2007 and 2012 there was a dip, which would have been logical given the way the economy was, with the crash, et cetera. People had less money and would have been more careful with what they were buying, and, therefore, there was less waste. People returning to greater spending power has perhaps caused the increase. How can you turn that behaviour around? WRAP estimates a loss of £470 a year per household. Is that something you think you could deploy to persuade people to take this more seriously? You were speaking a minute ago, Minister, about being able to influence behaviour without being mandatory and without the Government being totally in control. Do you have a strategy to influence individual human behaviour?

Dr Coffey: It is fair to say that we are working on a strategy. I am very conscious that, for all intents and purposes, it has not quite plateaued, but it is not far off. Business and food service are making good strides. Turning our attention to householders and individuals, there are innovations coming through on things like packaging. We could get into a discussion about labelling and some of the changes that we are making there, so that people are not, how can I put it, programmed to throw something away when it could be used.

There is innovation. Some of the work that they do on shelf life is quite interesting. There are certain reasons why pizza is sold with a particular material. That said, that then contributes to waste in a different way, but it extends the shelf life availability of a particular product, both in the store and in the house. There are other things. I cannot remember



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whether it is M&S or Tesco that has started to do things with two chicken breasts in the same package, but it is designed in such a way that people use them. I am at risk of starting to throw out ideas that we are looking at, without them coming together in a coherent strategy. That is what we are working on.

There was one little thing, and I think you want to talk about Sainsbury's in Swadlincote later. There was learning from that about fridge thermometers, and I have asked that we think about that. We have a group called ESAP, which deals with electrical equipment, and I have been asking that team to think about whether we could get AO.com or John Lewis to include a fridge thermometer, not necessarily one of these expensive ones that are built in, to make it as easy as possible for people to manage the food that they buy. That is the kind of straightforward solution that I am asking policy officials to consider how to make a reality, but we are not at the stage yet of having a formulated strategy.

Q522 Jim Fitzpatrick: Given that you obviously have ideas and are working out the strategy, do you have a road map between now and 2025 to achieve the targets? Do you expect it to step down gradually? Are there things in the pipeline, as you described, that might make a dramatic change, or is it too early to tell?

Chris Preston: It is not quite a year since it was launched, so we will do a review in perhaps a year's time to see how the changes in policy are working and having an effect on consumer behaviour. WRAP is already thinking about lessons learned from the previous Courtauld actions. That will include things like a refreshed behaviour change campaign, targeting the right kind of consumers. Not all consumers who waste food are the same. It will require looking at things like the top 10 wasted foods and why people waste particular types of foods, and targeting the interventions to make a difference for the future.

Q523 Chair: It is good from an environmental point of view to save food and waste less food, but it is also good economically, in your pocket. What can we as a Government and you as a department do to say to people, "Not only are you wasting food and causing potential problems for the environment, but you are also wasting a lot of your own money, and you could make your money go a lot further". Appealing to people's pocket sometimes works quite well. Are we doing enough of that? It is quite amazing how much money people are wasting.

Dr Coffey: It is challenging for the Government to not end up sounding like the nanny state.

Chair: Yes, but there has to be a balance, Minister.

Dr Coffey: That is what I am saying: it is challenging. We have tried some messaging. We are trying to do it through trusted retailers rather than the Government telling people to waste less. We know that is not effective. There are different campaigns about leftovers and Love Food



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Hate Waste, which is quite well known. How do we make that more meaningful? There is more that we can continue to do. It is why I recently wrote to the supermarket chief execs again, to help us think about their customers. At the end of the day, they know their customers a lot better than we do. That is their bread and butter. It is thinking about their messaging and how they can continue to do that. This is a personal view, rather than a government view: Sainsbury's probably does that best at the moment; Tesco is doing pretty well, and we need to encourage the others to do more.

Chair: You do it through the retailer.

Dr Coffey: It is not exclusively.

Q524 **Chair:** Some people will be appealed to from an environmental point of view; others will be appealed to much more on a financial basis, and they are not necessarily the same people. With these advertising campaigns and other things, you hit a level of people who are interested, and the rest of the population, putting it bluntly, could not care terribly much about it either way. Apathy rules, and it is how you get to the apathetic.

Dr Coffey: I have not got into, and I need to think carefully about, the pricing strategies of certain brands and products, which is also an element of this. The price per gram or per litre that you see on the supermarket shelf is another driver. There is a risk that people end up buying considerably more than they need and then throwing it away. I hear that there are other technical innovations coming on salad, so I am looking forward to that. I will not say, "Watch this space", because I do not know when it is coming, but there are innovations happening all the time. Certain kinds of milk will last seven days now.

Chair: Milk lasts a lot longer than it used to, that is for sure. When I was dairy farming, I could not keep it for so long.

Q525 **Ms Ritchie:** You are very welcome, Minister and Mr Preston. On the area of education, and particularly the school's curriculum, the Merseyside Recycling and Waste Authority states that new initiatives for learning and skills development around food are required. It notes that the national curriculum has neglected this for many years, leading to a proportion of young adults unable to cook, prone to wasting food and eating a diet high in convenience food. In view of that, have you discussed with the Department for Education the need for improved education on food and food waste as part of the national curriculum, with a view to better dietary standards but also, from your perspective within the Department, Minister, the minimisation of food waste?

Dr Coffey: Very straightforwardly, no, I have not.

Q526 **Ms Ritchie:** Have you any intention to do so?

Dr Coffey: It is interesting that domestic science did cross my mind, but I have not yet made it my intention to do that work with the DfE. I am



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very conscious of our general policy not to cram an already very busy educational curriculum, when there are many good calls on different things. I would suggest that the best schools are probably doing this already, but I will consider it food for thought.

Chair: As long as it is not wasted food.

Q527 **Ms Ritchie:** I note the pun that you have made, but there can be a correlation between those children who end up being economically inactive, in the NEET classes—not in education, employment or training—and those who engage in quite a lot of binge eating or eating the types of food that come out of carry-outs. That therefore increases the levels of packaging and waste. In view of that, would you, as the Minister, and your colleagues have a meeting to discuss this with ministerial colleagues in education?

Dr Coffey: I will think about it. I might have more success in thinking about how councils are involved in public health. I wonder if public health might be a more targeted way to do it. Quite a lot of challenging families are already known to the district nurses, and there are other elements around that. I am not describing them as troubled families, but I will have a think about it. I could easily go and have a meeting with the DfE about it.

Chair: I apologise, Minister, you were just getting going. We will go to vote and try to be back in 10 minutes.

Sitting suspended.