

Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee

Oral evidence: Food Waste, HC 429

Wednesday 19 Apr 2017

Ordered by the House of Commons to be published on 19 Apr 2017.

[Watch the meeting](#)

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

Questions 528-611

Witnesses

Dr Thérèse Coffey MP, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment and Rural Life Opportunities; and Chris Preston, Deputy Director, 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 MP and Chris Preston.

Chair: I welcome the Minister back to our Committee. The circumstances were so dreadful last time—a Division was called and then we had that terrible incident in which PC Keith Palmer and all those people on the bridge were killed. It was a sad moment. We appreciate your coming back today.

Dr Coffey: It was distressing for the officials, too, but I thank the Clerks, who took appropriate measures at the time to secure the doors, in accordance with procedure. Thank you for that.

Chair: We were shut in, but at least we were safe. That was the main thing.

Thank you again, Minister. Will you and Chris Preston introduce yourselves for the record, please? We will then get on with the formal business.

Dr Coffey: I am Thérèse Coffey, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment and Rural Life Opportunities.

Chris Preston: I am Chris Preston, Deputy Director of Waste and Recycling at DEFRA.

Q528 **Chair:** Welcome. The UK Government look to voluntary initiatives rather than a regulatory approach to deliver food waste reduction. Why have the Government not introduced a mandatory national food waste reduction target?

Dr Coffey: Recognising the different composition of our country—as you are aware, we are responsible for England in this regard—we think it is best to work with councils, encouraging them through our delivery partner, WRAP, to come up with solutions that best suit local communities.

One of the things I have been interested in doing—of course, yesterday's events bring it somewhat to a pause at the moment—is to do more to encourage councils to be more proactive in their approaches to how they undertake recycling initiatives. WRAP is doing ongoing work with our officials on elements of that. I do not think we are at the stage at which we need to be considering mandatory approaches. There are certain rules already in place about separate collections and so on. To go to one extreme, where a household is required to have seven or eight bins, is in my view not appropriate. It feels like using a sledgehammer to crack a nut.

Q529 **Chair:** Are you able to have a bit more of a carrot-and-stick approach, not necessarily with mandatory rules? I don't know whether you are able to give local authorities a little more support if they go in the right direction. Have you considered that?



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Dr Coffey: I have proactively met several council cabinet members and officials, particularly in urban areas, because that is where I feel we need to keep pushing. Rather than just going after councils that are doing a lot of recycling, if we can make a huge difference in Manchester, Birmingham and London, that would really help the overall target.

The British-Irish Council has got some research going on urban situations. We have approached two particular housing landlords in London to see whether we can work with them to pilot new approaches to how to improve the collection of waste, not just because it is social housing, but mainly because it is flats. We are looking at how we make that better. Newham is at 15%—it is the Olympic borough, and it had loads of stuff about recycling and green—but we need to get into everyday solutions, don't we? Chris, do you want to say a bit more?

Chris Preston: Yes. In terms of support for food waste collection, obviously WRAP published its consistency framework last September, which sets out a business case and an approach for more food waste collection, and is about improving household collections in general. The Government supplied cash for WRAP to help it support local authorities.

I think the Minister said last time that WRAP is working in seven areas with about 49 local authorities to make the transition to different types of food waste collection. That consistency framework sets out a vision for what we want to see in the next eight years or so, in terms of household collections. There is a policy framework in place to encourage that; it is just not a mandatory one.

Q530 **Chair:** One of the issues, when we have been out to talk to local authorities and had them here—we have been to waste sites—is that a lot of these contracts are for perhaps five or 10 years. In some ways, it is about making sure local authorities do change when those contracts come up to be re-bid for.

Dr Coffey: That is a fair point. I have met the LGA as well, and we know that some councils do this really well. I was particularly disappointed to learn a couple of weeks ago that a county, which I won't name today, has just signed an extension to its contract that actually makes it quite difficult to do more recycling. I'll be honest: I'm quite cross about that. If I am still in this role after the election, I will be following up with that county council leader, because that is not acceptable.

We should be working together to do more of this recycling. I recognise the difficulties that some councils operate under, but to deliberately sign contracts that you know can't improve recycling is not good politics. I am not talking about party politics; it is not a good thing for our citizens.

Q531 **Chair:** There is the possibility of naming and shaming such people. Can I not encourage you down the route of at least putting that on the record? It may stop others from going down the same route.

Dr Coffey: I understand that, but I don't think it would be fair to name and shame them in this forum, not having had the chance yet to speak to



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them directly. I recognise what you say, and Parliament is a powerful place to make those kinds of statements, but I don't want to get into an antagonistic relationship with the councils. We have to work together on this. When MPs or councillors have been to see me about certain things, I say, "Well, hold on. The people next door can manage to do it, and they are in exactly the same kind of scenario as you, so help us work together."

Q532 **Chair:** Perhaps, Minister, you ought to give them warning that you might name and shame them in the future if they don't behave better.

Dr Coffey: Well, who knows what we'll put in our response to your report?

Chair: All right; I look forward to that. Angela—question five.

Q533 **Angela Smith:** This is in relation to Swadlincote, which has been the focus of a pilot scheme—run by Sainsbury's, I think. We just wondered what your assessment of that scheme is and whether the Government are considering investing in other projects around the country. In other words, does the assessment lead you to believe that we should roll it out elsewhere?

Dr Coffey: Sainsbury's has not produced its report yet, I think I am right in saying, so we don't yet actually have anything to assess. I am very aware of the scheme. They came to Parliament; I was at a reception that they did. There were some ideas from there that we are quite keen on following up—some quite straightforward things. To give you an example, they gave fridge thermometers to people, and then Sainsbury's rolled out and gave out a million fridge thermometers around the country over a weekend or something like that.

That has led me to discuss some things with officials, such as, through the ESAP group—which is kind of the electronics group side of WRAP—to talk about whether there is something we can potentially do to get fridge thermometers handed out for free when people buy a fridge. There are some ideas out there that I think are quite straightforward that we can do—and encourage industry to do—in order to make this. Sainsbury's was telling us that that is one of its big achievements; people using their fridge correctly, at the right temperature, actually does a lot to reduce food waste.

Having not seen the report that Sainsbury's has done, I can only give you that short example of where we have had some discussions on it. I think we will look at it very carefully, because I genuinely believe, Angela, that supermarkets know their customers best. This is what they do for a living, in terms of understanding the buying patterns and working together. We know that other supermarkets are starting to do more labelling within their stores about how to reduce food waste, so I think we will look at that very carefully. Do you want to add anything, Chris?

Chris Preston: There are some preliminary results. WRAP are evaluating the results which, as the Minister says, will not be available until May. The Minister has already highlighted things like handing out the fridge



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thermometers, which makes a huge difference; getting your fridge temperature right is absolutely one of the key ways to reduce food waste.

As it happens, I attended a presentation on some of the results from the Swadlincote pilot and did a talk at that. There were some really interesting results. They were only high-level flavours of things, but things like working with schools—they managed to reduce food waste at one primary school by 37%, which is quite a significant change. We are really keen and looking forward to seeing the actual, evaluated results in May.

Q534 Angela Smith: The report is due in May. Are you or WRAP expecting to produce a formal response to the report? Is DEFRA going to respond formally?

Dr Coffey: I am not aware that we are going to respond formally to the report—that was not in my mind—but we want to look at it carefully. There is potentially a great opportunity to continue to work with the Courtauld 2025 partners more broadly. Hearing about the school's reduction in food waste, there is a huge opportunity for the DFE and our local councils and academy sponsors to take some lessons from that and see what works. Without actually seeing the report, it is a bit difficult to give an assessment of what we would do with it.

Q535 Angela Smith: But are the Government—or the Ministers in the Department—open to potentially providing investment to start up similar projects elsewhere, given a positive evaluation? The evaluation looks as though it is going to be very positive.

Dr Coffey: I don't pretend there's a lot of money around in DEFRA. I couldn't give you a definitive answer today of whether we will invest in it or not, because we need to look at the report, see what kind of investment might be worthwhile and see how it could be rolled out. I am afraid it is just too early in our consideration whether we can do that or not.

Q536 Angela Smith: But potentially, could this Committee, reconstituted after the election, look forward to hearing from Ministers—whether from yourself, Thérèse, or someone else—about your decisions in the end on this evaluation?

Dr Coffey: I would hope so.

Q537 Angela Smith: So you could write to us?

Dr Coffey: I cannot commit a future Government, but I am sure there is no reason why a sensible Minister would not want to share their thoughts with the Committee.

Q538 Chris Davies: Witnesses have called for businesses to report food surplus and waste. Do you intend to pass legislation? Before yesterday's announcement, were you thinking of passing legislation requiring food businesses to report data on food waste publicly?

Dr Coffey: No, that is not part of our philosophy. At the moment, businesses share their data with WRAP and WRAP pulls it together in an aggregate. Some businesses—Tesco, I think, and Sainsbury's—publish



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their reports. I am sure they would be keen for others to do the same, but we have already seen some voluntary publishing. I'm not sure what it would achieve, to be blunt, especially when you consider the small percentage of food waste that is actually from the supermarket. One of the biggest contributors of food waste is within the household, so I am not sure exactly what outcome it would achieve.

Q539 Chris Davies: As opposed to legislation, with a few companies already producing these results, could you see the merit in a voluntary code, or would you not even go down that route?

Dr Coffey: How can I put it? We have two supermarkets leading the way. If other supermarkets were interested in doing it, of course we would not stand in their way. Again, I do not know whether a voluntary code is something that they might want to develop through WRAP. What I am seeing through WRAP is that it is a trusted convenor, they are working together and it is almost starting to spark some competition between the retailers on improvements.

Q540 Dr Monaghan: The Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy has said that businesses in England should have a food surplus and waste management plan. Do you think that would be an appropriate course of action? Is that something that you would support?

Dr Coffey: Let me think about how I answer that. It is quite an interesting approach. In terms of resource efficiency, it is not in the commercial interest of any business to have waste. Preventing waste in the first place is sensible for the environment, but also for the bottom line in financial terms. I will be candid: I was not aware that BEIS had published that view and I will look into it further.

Q541 Dr Monaghan: It has published that clearly and it is quite a strong view. It picks up on some of the weaknesses identified by the Courtauld commitments, inasmuch as businesses across England do not aggregate their data. The data that is available lacks some transparency and allows many underperforming businesses off the hook. I take your point that it is not in the interest of businesses to produce waste, but many do. The view of the Committee, as heard in evidence, is that the Government need to act to bring that under control. That is the driver for this recommendation.

Dr Coffey: Businesses have to pay to dispose of waste. It is in their financial interest in all sorts of ways to reduce the amount of waste that they generate. I have seen on some of my trips to businesses a much more proactive way of trying to make money out of waste in what they do. I think we went to British Sugar, which has now managed to reduce its non-reuse of waste to about 2% of its output. Clearly they are leading in a strong way, but I am not convinced that the fact that you publish would make huge changes to behaviour. Companies will do things that partly help the environment but also help their economics.

Q542 Dr Monaghan: Surely it would be worthwhile aspiring to even a small step in the right direction, and the strategy could encourage that sort of



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objective.

Dr Coffey: I will reflect carefully on what you have put forward, but I am not convinced that getting into a regulatory approach is necessarily going to be best way to achieve the outcome you want.

Q543 **Dr Monaghan:** That is kind, thank you. It was not me who put it forward, though; it was your colleagues at the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy.

Dr Coffey: As I just indicated to you—I was being candid—I had not heard that before and therefore it is a little bit difficult to give a view, because I do not know the basis of where, how or what was said exactly.

Q544 **Chair:** Okay, but you will go through to them and check it out.

Dr Coffey: Yes, absolutely.

Q545 **Chair:** It would be quite nice if we had something back in writing. That would be very useful. We do not have much time to get it back in writing, do we?

Dr Coffey: No, but Chris is efficient.

Chair: As I said earlier, we will try to get this report together next week, so it would be very useful if you got it back quite quickly.

Q546 **David Simpson:** Good afternoon, Minister. What role do you see for retailers in reducing food waste by consumers?

Dr Coffey: They can really help us. WRAP has done a pretty good job over the years with consumer campaigns, but we have reached a plateau and my strong view is that the experts are the retailers. They know what their customers are buying and how they are using it, and they have more information from that—Sainsbury's is particularly good in this area, but other supermarkets are improving—about how people prepare and keep food, the top 10 list of foods, which should become more widely available, and what people end up wasting. Retailers are a key part of this.

Q547 **David Simpson:** What more can you do as a Minister to influence the other supermarkets to play catch-up?

Dr Coffey: We have seen considerable progress quite recently, and the Courtauld 2025 set-up is helping that. As has been indicated, using WRAP as the facilitator and convenor provides a safe space for people to share that information so that it is not public but they can learn from one other. I have written fairly recently—in the last month—to all the chief executives of the supermarkets to thank them for their progress but encourage them to do more. I have asked them to share with me their plans further to reduce food waste in all the different parts of their supply chain.

Q548 **Rebecca Pow:** Welcome, Minister and Mr Preston. Minister, I gather that you are currently working with the Food Standards Agency and WRAP to update guidance to the industry on date labelling, which will particularly cover some of the issues with "use by" and "best before" dates, which we



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are finding are quite confusing and potentially lead to lots of food being thrown away that does not need to be. Can you update us on how that is going, what you are planning and the timescale?

Dr Coffey: Yes, there is work progressing on that. With what has happened in the last 24 hours, it is a little difficult to know what I am allowed to say and what I am not allowed to say in terms of setting new policy direction or giving information, but I will ask Chris to say something.

Q549 **Chair:** You can tell us the direction you would like to see it go in.

Rebecca Pow: What were you planning, Minister?

Chair: Let's be very positive about it. Tell us where you would like it to go.

Dr Coffey: I am sure Chris can say some words that I cannot say.

Chris Preston: In terms of what WRAP has done, you are quite right that it has worked with the Food Standards Agency and retailers to produce better guidance about the use of "best before" and "use by" dates, which are really confusing for most people. WRAP's recent survey—I think it was in February this year—showed that quite significant progress has been made in terms of date labelling. I cannot remember the stats off the top of my head, but they identified things like the almost complete removal of two types of labelling on things—"use by" and "best before"—which is quite good. That confuses people, so there has been really good progress there. They also identified changes to things like "best before" dates on things like cheese that will go beyond their "best before" date. You obviously want the "use by" date to be there, because food is not safe to eat after that point, but everybody eats their cheese well after the "best before" date.

However, what WRAP did identify—it is not future policy, because we have already talked about it—

Dr Coffey: Oh, okay. That's all right, then.

Chris Preston: It has all come flooding back. What WRAP did say is that more needs to be done on "freeze by" dates and labelling, to make it easier for people to store food, so there is work to do in those areas.

Dr Coffey: Our intention had been for guidance to be published by the end of this year.

Q550 **Chair:** Do we need "best before" if something is safe to eat for the whole period until the "use by" date? I have a son who is incredibly fussy, and it is likely that if food has exceeded the "best before" date, he might well throw it away. There are people out there who do that. Surely the food is either safe to eat or not safe to eat. More food is being thrown away unnecessarily because of it.

Dr Coffey: You may well be right. I think the supermarkets tend to use "best before" as a way of rotating their stock, so there is an element of



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how long something should be on the shelf, as opposed to how long it can be stored at home. I am not aware of what we have decided to do about that, but we are trying to make it simpler to encourage what you are saying. It is not just about food being safe to eat; it is about it being good to eat.

Q551 **Rebecca Pow:** You mentioned freezing. Are you suggesting that many people keep food for a while and then think it is too late to freeze it?

Dr Coffey: Yes, because the labelling currently says, "Freeze on day of purchase", but you can usually freeze things a bit later.

Chair: Things like cheese can be frozen quite late.

Q552 **Rebecca Pow:** And the timescale—did we get an answer to that question? I suppose it is all thrown up in the air.

Dr Coffey: Our original intention was to publish later this year—by the end of the year—but I don't know now because of what happens with delays. Even a few weeks can delay stuff considerably.

Chair: I am sure that a good Department can catch up time later, Minister.

Dr Coffey: That is true. It is not so much that as the whole machinery of government.

Q553 **Dr Monaghan:** What discussions have you had with the hospitality sector about ideas such as portion size to reduce food waste?

Dr Coffey: To be honest, I have not personally done that, but WRAP has been in discussion with them, haven't they?

Chris Preston: Yes. The hospitality sector is part of the Courtauld commitment. Under the first two agreements, WRAP worked with it to reduce the amount of food waste in those areas, and we are thinking about portion size at the moment.

Dr Coffey: It is quite difficult to say this about future stuff, but I know there has been some work elsewhere about how we—not we as a Government, but as in restaurants—are being encouraged to look at plate waste and the financial benefits of reducing portions without the challenge of being considered as giving poor value for money. From memory, there have been some interesting trials in which people have, in effect, weighed how much they have thrown away, because they have given too much food to their customers and that has hurt their bottom line. Some stuff about smarter preparation has been going on.

Q554 **Dr Monaghan:** So it is a process of education, to some extent.

Dr Coffey: Yes.

Q555 **Dr Monaghan:** And have the discussions led to any specific objectives being established?

Dr Coffey: I don't know the answer to that.



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Chris Preston: I guess the general objective is to look at how you manage your business, look at where your food waste is and try to eliminate that. It is probably fair to say that between 2012 and 2015 we managed to secure an additional 11% reduction in food waste from the hospitality and food waste sector, so good progress was made there.

Dr Coffey: It is quite difficult. The Government are not going to tell restaurants exactly what they can and cannot serve. This is all coming back to social responsibility and people not wanting to throw away good food that could be redistributed and so on, and also helping them with the economics of their business. It will vary with business models.

Q556 **Dr Monaghan:** There are huge opportunities. This sector, as you probably know, generates 920,000 tonnes of food waste every year, 75% of which is avoidable.

On specific objectives, have you looked at the Good to Go scheme, which was initiated in Scotland and encourages people to take home uneaten food at the end of their dining session, and thought about applying that in England?

Dr Coffey: I haven't. I suppose it is a much nicer name than "doggy bag" scheme. I haven't seen that, but I guess it is something we could look into.

Q557 **Chair:** In America, it is almost taken as read—I know that portions are huge—that people take home what they don't eat.

Dr Coffey: It is interesting that you say that, because portions are huge in the States. I do not know the details of what exactly happens in Scotland. For what it is worth, I always try to make sure that if people have been over-generous we get someone to wrap it up and we take it home. It is not standard practice in England, it is fair to say.

Q558 **Chair:** It would reduce quite a lot of hospitality waste, would it not?

Dr Coffey: Yes.

Chris Preston: I think so.

Q559 **Chair:** So if you remain in this role, you might look at that in the future?

Dr Coffey: Yes.

David Simpson: I never really have a problem with food.

Chair: I am the same, David: you and I both.

Dr Coffey: I was about to say that I take the clean plate approach.

David Simpson: I am known for that. My reputation—

Chair: Goes before you—that is right.

Q560 **David Simpson:** There has been a steady reduction, Minister, in central Government funding to WRAP over the past few years. What assurances



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can you give us that there will be no further reductions as it works to deliver Courtauld 2025?

Dr Coffey: WRAP has seen a significant reduction, I recognise that, but it is now a charity and it has its own board of trustees. We work with it as our delivery partner, but we have also been encouraging it to go and do innovative work and—dare I say it?—bring in money and other resources. We have to consider our budgets for the future, but at this stage I cannot give any further information.

Q561 **David Simpson:** Has that worked? You have encouraged it to try to generate more revenue. Has it worked and is it progressing? Chris, will you answer that?

Chris Preston: Yes.

Dr Coffey: I think it has. Dare I say it, but I am a member of a political party that believes that we need to live within our means? But there is also something there about how we focus resources and how to prioritise when resources are somewhat more constrained. In my view, it was a good way to make sure that WRAP kept focused. Of course, there is a certain tipping point when it starts to become challenging; nevertheless, we need to constantly keep under review what it is we are asking WRAP to do and therefore, as a Government, how much funding we give to WRAP as a proportion of its total income.

Q562 **David Simpson:** Absolutely. As long as the reduction in cash does not stop it producing and doing the work it is supposed to do—I think that is the tipping point you referred to.

Chris Preston: Ministers have been quite clear about funding and the kinds of priorities that they want the funding that is made available to go to. There was a fairly significant review of WRAP and what it did back in 2013-14 and that refocused WRAP's activities. As the Minister said, WRAP has been encouraged to seek out other sources of funding. For example, there is now Courtauld and signatories pay to be part of that process. I think that is the right way to go. The Minister has also said that WRAP's convening role is really useful to get things moving in the first place, to make change start to happen.

Q563 **Chair:** Are you confident that if WRAP is ever more funded by the retailer, it will be considered neutral when it is judging the situation?

Dr Coffey: WRAP is not a regulator on waste, but it helps bring people together, in effect, to comply with regulation. It is not unusual for people to pay towards the cost of that kind of development work. Obviously, we set the overall policy framework, and that is why we will continue to fund WRAP, to focus on our priorities, but I do not think that people should second-guess the value of WRAP just because the supermarkets and others help to pay for it.

Q564 **Chair:** The retail sector funds the grocery code adjudicator, does it not? That is directly some form of regulator, I suppose, in some respects. It is about making sure that it is seen to be doing its job, I think.



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Dr Coffey: Yes: it is there to facilitate rather than to regulate.

Chair: Chris has a question about redistribution.

Q565 **Chris Davies:** What seems a very long time ago now, we visited a certain part of London to go to a food waste centre. It was not recycling but somewhere they picked up food waste from various supermarkets, cooked and served it to the community. It was a very interesting visit, I must say. In France, there is legislation which requires all food businesses of a certain size to have a policy in place for food distribution to charities. Would you look at that as a possible way forward?

Dr Coffey: I have looked into this. Like for like, in terms of population and the size of the food industry, we have redistribution on a comparable level—I'm not saying in exact terms of volume, because the food industry in France is a lot bigger than the equivalent in the UK. I think we are already achieving similar outcomes without the need for further regulation. Again, why would we need to regulate in that regard?

I have spoken to some of the supermarkets to encourage them to do more. They all have redistribution partners. I know in certain parts of the country they struggle at times with finding local partners, but I have encouraged them. For every store, one of the things I have suggested they do is let the local MPs know who the redistribution partner is for that store, as a way of showing that it is not just some central office idea; it is actually being done store by store.

Where they are struggling to find a redistribution partner, they could involve the local community in trying to find one. I am not saying I have done that formally; I have done it informally. The redistribution is happening. It could continue to increase, but I don't think we need regulation to make that difference.

Q566 **Chris Davies:** Does the evidence you have looked into show that primarily the city areas are offering this service?

Dr Coffey: I think it is fair to say—anecdotally, rather than from empirical evidence—that they have found it easier to find redistribution partners in urban areas.

Q567 **Chair:** Partly because of distance, I imagine, and the concentration of population. Is that right?

Dr Coffey: There is an element of that. There is an element of identified need.

Q568 **Chair:** You are working with the industry to encourage them to work with the charities. Is that what you are saying, Minister?

Dr Coffey: I have been encouraging some of the supermarkets directly, to say, "What would success look like? Success would look like every single store having a named partner who it works with, and if you can't find one, work with your local councils and MPs to try to identify one as far as possible." But I won't say I have done that as a formal direction to them.



Q569 Kerry McCarthy: Can I ask about the food waste hierarchy, further down? At the moment, we have the landfill tax, which discourages people from sending anything to landfill, but there are not really incentives to discourage food being sent to anaerobic digestion, instead of being donated or eaten. Have you looked into that?

Dr Coffey: Clearly, under the waste hierarchy, redistribution of edible food—sorry, I should say “food suitable for human consumption”, not “edible food”—is the top priority. Working through our relationships with the retailers, we are seeing that happen. We are not seeing it happen in every single store—I recognise that—but we are seeing that change. There is food at a certain stage that is not suitable for redistribution but could be used for animal feed or anaerobic digestion. Off the top of my head, I can’t remember—

Q570 Kerry McCarthy: But do you accept that at the moment, a lot of food suitable for human consumption is going to anaerobic digestion? That is the problem. I accept that some things will never have another use. What do we do about that?

Dr Coffey: I was under the impression, from WRAP, that that is not identified as being as big a problem as people might perceive.

Chris Preston: It is true that some food that could be suitable for redistribution does end up in anaerobic digestion, but there are a whole host of reasons why that food might not be redistributed. It links back to working in partnership and putting in place the right infrastructure to have food redistribution partnerships with different organisations.

If I was a supermarket and had a smaller supermarket somewhere, I might have some food that could be suitable for redistribution, but the technical logistics of getting that food to be redistributed is something I have either not thought about or is quite difficult to solve in my area. That is part of the guidance work that WRAP is doing under its food redistribution working group. In terms of its analysis and working with Courtauld signatories, WRAP has said that it has an ambition to get the amount of food suitable for redistribution from about 47,000 tonnes at the moment up to 180,000 tonnes by 2025. So the ambition is there to push that further.

Q571 Kerry McCarthy: But at the moment, there is no financial incentive or disincentive for the supermarkets, manufacturers or anyone in the supply chain to go down the donation route, as opposed to the anaerobic digestion route. In some cases, it is cheaper because they may even be able to sell it to the AD plant.

Dr Coffey: That is clearly an accurate assessment in that there is not a financial incentive to redistribute, but I do think that the ongoing consumer awareness has made it in companies’ interests to do more of that redistribution, and we are seeing a positive approach from them.

I am not aware that we are going to change our approach to AD more broadly, because we are trying to decarbonise electricity supply or the



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energy supply, so BEIS will continue to support AD. It is through our encouragement, again through Courtauld, that we are trying to ensure that people put this as a priority. That is why you see things such as the Tesco commitment, where they have made those public commitments themselves as part of their own mission within their company, and they work to fulfil that.

Q572 Kerry McCarthy: We heard from Lindsay Boswell of FareShare among others that at the moment still only a tiny proportion of the food that is suitable for donation is donated. We also heard from Charlotte Morton from the Anaerobic Digestion and Bioresources Association that they don't actually need that surplus food to keep the AD plants going; there is plenty of other produce out there that they could rely on.

Do you not think there is scope to do more? May I ask this in particular? I think France, for example, has introduced tax breaks to incentivise the redistribution of surplus food. Is that something you have looked at all?

Dr Coffey: No, it is not.

Q573 Kerry McCarthy: Okay. May I ask why? Is it just not on your radar? Would you be willing to look at it now?

Dr Coffey: To be blunt, I am not convinced that trying to get into taxation as a way to stimulate company behaviour is the best way to use tax relief.

Q574 Kerry McCarthy: But that is what the landfill tax was all about.

Dr Coffey: The landfill tax is very deliberate about trying to avoid putting stuff into landfill. That is part of an overall, overarching policy. In terms of getting into the intricacies of how you give a tax relief to people to incentivise them to redistribute food or not, ultimately the intention should be not to have any food waste at all, to prevent that in the first place.

Q575 Kerry McCarthy: At the moment we have a waste hierarchy in law, which we are meant to be observing. The questions that I have asked show that the Environment Agency, whose job it is to police this, does not really do anything along those lines. It does not really have the resources to do it. So, we have something that is not being observed. Is it an ideological thing with you, Minister—that you just don't think that Government has a role to play in this?

Dr Coffey: Government has played a role. I am just not convinced that doing tax measures to try to change corporate behaviour in this particular area is the best way to use financial resources.

Q576 Kerry McCarthy: But the landfill tax works and the tax on plastic bags had a really significant effect on behaviour. So, why are you not convinced that this would make a difference?

Dr Coffey: With plastic bags, it was about how to reduce the amount of plastic when there is a ready alternative, which has had an impact on behaviour in that particular area by consumers rather than the retailers themselves. I haven't considered it in detail. I instinctively don't see how tax measures would really make a big change to this, so I am happy to



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continue to try to encourage our retailers and distributors to do more in this field of giving more that way.

Q577 Kerry McCarthy: This is my final question. Some witnesses have called on the Government to set up a fund of £10 million to offset the costs of redistributing surplus food. Is that something you have looked at?

Dr Coffey: I am not aware that that policy proposal has come before me and I am not aware that I have ever received a letter from anybody about that. Are you aware of anything, Chris?

Chris Preston: No.

Q578 Chair: Getting the food out to some of these small charities is quite difficult.

Kerry McCarthy: Yes, transport costs.

Chair: It is difficult for them to collect sometimes. Perhaps not direct Government money, but any more encouragement that you could give the retailers to get it out to charities is good. We have been to see the charities and some of them struggle to get this food from the big retailers.

Dr Coffey: Okay. We will look carefully at your recommendations.

Kerry McCarthy: For future reference.

Q579 David Simpson: We have heard suggestions that haulage firms should be given a tax break allowing them to support redistribution charities in collecting food from retailers. How do you respond to that in view of the previous answer?

Dr Coffey: Again, getting into all sorts of tax measures to get companies to behave in a particular way in this field is not an avenue that I think we are going to head down.

Q580 David Simpson: How, then, do you incentivise them to do it? Do you penalise them in some way? How do you do it?

Dr Coffey: I haven't thought about it.

Q581 David Simpson: Perhaps that is something that in the future you would have to look at?

Dr Coffey: Perhaps.

Q582 Chair: You see, Minister, you did not want to name and shame them just now, but in a way, if you are not going to give them any sort of tax break, surely you could actually publish those that are best at redistributing food—those that co-operate best with the charities—because then the others would have to try to catch up, wouldn't they? The best retailers probably do quite a good job, but a lot of others are not really getting that food out to the charities, which is what they need to do. A lot of good food is still being wasted. I am just wondering what more you can do.



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Dr Coffey: Okay, I will have to reflect on that, because it is not a policy avenue we have previously gone down.

David Simpson: Minister, if you go to restaurants, you know they are rated as to how good they are: x, y and z. Surely, there could be something in comparison to that with those that are performing, may be not at the same level, but well, so that they could be rated 10 out of 10, or nine, or eight or seven.

Q583 **Chair:** It doesn't have to be negative. It could actually be positive.

Dr Coffey: Chris wants to add a few things.

Chris Preston: Just a couple of points. The French tax break system has been in place since 1988. As the Minister highlighted, our levels of redistribution are very similar. Businesses can claim back some of the tax for food that they donate as well. That element is there for businesses. In terms of sending things to anaerobic digestion or industrial compost—

Q584 **Chair:** Let me get this clear. They can claim if they are giving a certain amount of food to a charity. Can they claim the cost of that food as tax deductible?

Chris Preston: Yes.

Chair: Okay.

Chris Preston: So that does exist already, but not in quite the same way as the French system works.

Dr Coffey: But you don't have a tax system that is done deliberately to generate waste. If there is waste and it is used in this kind of corporate charity way that is a slightly different way from what then becomes taxable profits. So there is an element of that.

Chair: Okay, happy?

Q585 **David Simpson:** Yes. When you go into some of the retail shops, such as a butcher's shop, certainly in Northern Ireland, you will see a rating: "These premises have received nine out of 10 for hygiene control" or whatever. Something similar to that could be looked at. It is only a suggestion. I will leave it there.

Chair: It is quite an interesting idea. Chris, do you want to make a quick point?

Q586 **Chris Davies:** Just a quickie on your previous point: I did not realise that supermarkets could get tax relief if they gave food. Is this a well-known fact and does it apply to small high-street traders as well as to supermarkets?

Chris Preston: It is a charitable donation—in the same way, businesses can claim tax back on a charitable donation. It is the same kind of thing, or on the loss of tradable stock as well.

Q587 **Chair:** And HMRC is sympathetic to this, is it? I just wonder what you put on your tax return and what it is going to say. You believe it is?

Chris Preston: Me?

Chair: Yes.

Chris Preston: It is part of the tax code so it is set out for any business to look at. It is available on HMRC's website.

Q588 **Angela Smith:** Moving on now to the waste hierarchy, which of course is a legal requirement: some witnesses have been critical that the hierarchy is not being enforced. Can you tell us what discussions have taken place with the Environment Agency on this?

Dr Coffey: It is fair to say that I haven't had any direct conversations with the Environment Agency on enforcement of the hierarchy.

Q589 **Chair:** But I think you are due to have one?

Dr Coffey: I am saying me personally. Officials have had some of these discussions.

Q590 **Angela Smith:** Has Mr Preston?

Chris Preston: We have talked about it. The Environment Agency will take a risk-based approach to enforcing the waste hierarchy. When the changes to the regulations came in in, I think, 2012, we updated things like waste transfer notes. Now, if somebody transfers my waste to someone else, I have to indicate on there that I have considered the waste hierarchy in how I have handled that waste. In terms of encouraging proper use, as the Minister said, prevention is key and that is where we are working. There are considerations about how you apply the waste hierarchy. Is it technically, economically and environmentally feasible to move waste up the hierarchy, in terms of how you treat it?

Q591 **Angela Smith:** Overall, though, we need to hear in quite straightforward terms how you intend to improve enforcement. What direction are you prepared to give, Minister, and what discussions are you prepared to have to make sure that enforcement improves?

Dr Coffey: I am thinking. It has not come up. I am happy, if I am still in this role in the future, to raise that at my next discussion with the Environment Agency chief exec, to understand a bit more what they are doing. I recognise that the Environment Agency has a wide range of responsibilities and that is why I keep coming back to continuing to encourage WRAP and Courtauld. Courtauld covers 95% of the industry and if we can get improvements there, that makes a massive difference to the reduction of waste and how any waste that is treated can go up the waste hierarchy.

Angela Smith: I am not getting, and I do not think the Committee is getting, a clear sense from the answers about what the ministerial or departmental assessment is of whether the hierarchy is being properly enforced.

Q592 **Chair:** If I could add to that, the witnesses were also saying that they felt that the Environment Agency did not see it as one of its priorities, yet it



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is a legal requirement. I think that was the issue.

Dr Coffey: I think, coming back to it again, that it is about working with the producers directly to change that cultural behaviour. It is changing; we are seeing more happening, with stuff going up the waste hierarchy. It is fair to say that I have not had discussions with the Environment Agency, asking it to go and focus particularly on enforcement. As Chris set out, there is a risk-based approach. If we had intelligence that particular people were doing something that was illegal, we could direct resources towards that, but at the moment, when it comes to waste more broadly, I have asked the Environment Agency and it is doing quite a lot on waste crime—dumping and other elements of that—rather than looking at such things as the food hierarchy. That is from my level of conversation.

Q593 **Angela Smith:** But that is quite worrying. I go back to the question of what the Department is going to do to ensure that the Environment Agency—

Dr Coffey: I have just answered that.

Q594 **Angela Smith:** I do not think that has been answered, frankly.

Dr Coffey: I have just answered it.

Q595 **Angela Smith:** Well, you are saying it has another priority. That is not an answer. In other words, the Department is not really that interested in enforcement.

Dr Coffey: No, I said I will bring it up at my next meeting with the Environment Agency chief executive if I am still in this role after the election. That is what I have said I will do.

Q596 **Angela Smith:** Is there a commitment, therefore, to make sure that where enforcement needs to be improved, it will be improved?

Dr Coffey: As I said, I will raise it with the chief executive of the Environment Agency after the election if I am reappointed to this role.

Chair: It is, I believe, a legal requirement, you see.

Angela Smith: It is a legal requirement.

Chair: That is where we want the Environment Agency to take a little more action if it can, please.

Q597 **Rebecca Pow:** This is about feeding catering waste to livestock, which at the moment is still banned. It was banned in 2001 across Europe but there is a strong lobby for revoking the ban. What are your views on that, Minister?

Dr Coffey: Food waste can be fed to livestock, just not with meat.

Chair: It must have no meat in it.

Dr Coffey: Yes; pigs can be fed bread, dairy, fruit and vegetables. It is just meat and, I think, cooked waste. There were very good reasons for the ban—biosecurity and all these outbreaks that happened. We have no intention of revisiting that.



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Q598 **Rebecca Pow:** Even if it had a very robust framework of protections around it.

Dr Coffey: We believe that the protections we have today are robust and necessary, so we are not revisiting it.

Q599 **Rebecca Pow:** Data show that there is something like—we could actually stop having to grow about 8 million tonnes of grain that we feed to pigs, if only we could use some of our waste food, were it properly heat treated. Mr Preston, do you have any views about that?

Chris Preston: As the Minister said, non-animal by-product food, if it is properly separated, can already be fed to animals. The Minister has outlined why animal by-products are not fed to livestock.

Q600 **Rebecca Pow:** So you have no plans at all to look at that. There is obviously a big cost saving in that. There is a big area of land saved. Our resource of land is going to become more and more precious, I would suggest especially with Brexit, where we may potentially have to become more sustainable and grow more food at home. Would it not be an area that might be looked at, if the absolutely correct safeguards were put in place?

Dr Coffey: There were supposed to be safeguards in the past and look what happened. We are not doing it.

Q601 **Chair:** I have a certain amount of sympathy with the Minister because there is no doubt that the 2001 outbreak is largely attributed to meat waste that was not cooked properly. If you brought in a pig swill operation it would have to be properly monitored.

The only trouble is that very often, unless you have large organisations doing that, sometimes some of the smaller ones might cut corners. That is the issue. It is a shame to waste all that food; I think Rebecca has a good point but I also have some sympathy with the Minister on this one. I think the Germans have partially been—they might still be feeding pig swill, I'm not sure. I know it is a big issue in Germany in particular.

Dr Coffey: We are quite clear: it is not worth the risk.

Chair: Okay. We won't press you any further on that.

Q602 **Kerry McCarthy:** Going back to the earlier question, why is such a low percentage of food waste recycled, in terms of going into AD rather than into landfill?

Dr Coffey: We have tried to remove barriers. One bit of work that WRAP is doing at the moment with one of the advisory groups is looking into the barriers of what is stopping that. I don't know how much progress they have made so far.

Chris Preston: In terms of food waste being collected and not sent either to go to in-vessel composting or to anaerobic digestion, there has been a massive increase in terms of that biowaste—not all biowaste because some of it is garden waste as well. You have got something like 52% of



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local authorities now collecting separate food and/or mixed garden waste. We are seeing an increase in the amount that is being diverted away from landfill.

Q603 Kerry McCarthy: Do you know how much goes into landfill?

Dr Coffey: We were discussing this earlier today because I had a different figure in my mind. WRAP's assessment was that it was about 19% but I had some different stats provided to me, so I will check and write to the Committee.

Q604 Kerry McCarthy: I think it would make sense to do question 27 with this to save time. Some witnesses have called for a complete ban on sending food waste to landfill. What is your view on that?

Dr Coffey: That would be challenging to do initially. We are looking. Again, I have to be careful that I do not venture off into new policy areas. We are looking at what we can do to improve the collection of food waste more generally and seeing what are the barriers to that happening. In Bristol, you have that food collection. Some of the council areas represented by Members here do not have that at all. We are looking at what more we can do to get more food waste collected and recycled.

Q605 Kerry McCarthy: But a ban would encourage local authorities; it would put an onus on them to do that.

Dr Coffey: Yes, but we would like to work with the councils to move more to be collecting food and that kind of waste. Sheffield and Barnsley, for example.

Q606 Kerry McCarthy: Okay. Some people have made the argument that it would have a negative on Government revenues. People have to pay to send things to landfill, so the Government profit from stuff being sent to landfill. Is that a factor in your calculations?

Dr Coffey: I have not looked at it in that regard. We just want to continue to—it is not a case of upping the ante—work more with councils, such as the work outlined earlier that WRAP is doing with about eight counties. We are doing this project in London, which we have just started scoping, with some landlords, to see what we can do to get more readily—to understand the barriers and what is stopping people recycling food and what is stopping councils doing it as well.

I am not here to try to put loads of taxes on everything; I want to achieve the outcome. It may be that, as you pointed out earlier, landfill tax was a way to change councils' behaviours, and we might need to go down that route in the future, but I do not want to set hares running. I want to work on practical measures and really understand the barriers and what is stopping councils and homeowners doing the right thing in that regard.

Q607 Ms Ritchie: My question is about the whole area of separate food waste collections. Only approximately 50% of local authorities in England currently provide separate food waste collection. Are you considering imposing a statutory requirement on all local authorities to collect food



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waste separately? I know from the Northern Ireland context that there is new legislation that empowers councils there to ensure that food waste is collected separately from the beginning of May. In fact, we have all been supplied with brown bins— those of us who did not have them hitherto. What is the position here?

Dr Coffey: In England we are not considering mandatory separate collection, but are doing more work with councils to identify the barriers to doing that. There are benefits, which Kerry may have been starting to allude to, to reducing the amount of food in landfill waste. We know that it is not good for greenhouse gas emissions, so there may be opportunities to work with BEIS to see what more we can do.

I was due to have a meeting with Ministers on this issue—what we are doing in a more holistic approach on food waste—but because of yesterday's announcement that meeting has had to be deferred. Again, we are identifying the barriers and helping to understand, for example, why parts of Yorkshire do not collect food waste but the county next door does. It is getting into that level of detail council by council.

Q608 **Ms Ritchie:** Minister, from my understanding of what you have just said, you are basically in an exploratory phase at the moment, which might determine where you might go.

Dr Coffey: It is not on the agenda to move to a mandatory system. It is on the agenda to remove the excuses and the barriers to doing this. It is not our general approach to just create new primary legislation and new burdens. We would rather get on and be practical in the outcomes rather than just regulating for it.

Q609 **Chair:** The issue is that only half of local authorities are collecting. That is not anywhere near enough, is it?

Dr Coffey: I think Chris wanted to add a bit more on some of the detail. We are working closely with a group of councils, and we hope from that that the LGA will then continue to spread that good practice.

Chris Preston: It has doubled without being mandatory, so there is real progress there. WRAP has also been working on a local authority led initiative on good practice guidance for local authorities who want to move to separate food waste collection. It sets out what local authorities need to do. I think that WRAP is working with—I might get this slightly wrong—about 31 local authorities at the moment to put separate food waste collection in place. The voluntary approach is working in terms of encouraging local authorities to take that up.

Dr Coffey: I have really been trying to nudge the LGA to do a lot more pulling together—

Q610 **Chair:** I think you want to more than nudge them Minister; I think you want to kick them a bit harder, if I can be so brutal. *[Interruption.]* What is your timeframe, Minister? We have a Division. Can you come back again?



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Dr Coffey: I am always at the Committee's disposal.

Chair: What do Members want to do? I am more than happy to come back again, or do you want to do them in writing? What do you want to do?

Ms Ritchie: I have to go, Chair.

Q611 **Chair:** Are we going to be quorate? Just about. I think, Minister, it is probably risky. If you don't mind, could you let us have your answers to the last questions in writing, and could we have them relatively quickly—before the end of the week—because we need to put them into the report next week?

I appreciate your time and your answers. I shall bring this meeting to a close, and we had better go down and vote otherwise we will all be in trouble. Thank you very much, Minister, for your straightforward answers this afternoon, and thank you, too, Mr Preston.