

Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee

Oral evidence: Plastic food and drink packaging, HC 2080

Wednesday 3 July 2019

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[Watch the meeting](#)

Members present: Neil Parish (Chair); Alan Brown; Dr Caroline Johnson; Kerry McCarthy; Mrs Sheryll Murray; David Simpson.

Questions 72 - 204

Witnesses

I: Karen Graley, Packaging and Reprographics Manager, Waitrose; Stuart Lendrum, Head of Packaging, Iceland; Robin Clark, Director of Business Partnerships, Just Eat.

II: Andy Sweetman, Chair, Bio-based and Biodegradable Industries Association; Barry Turner, Plastic & Flexible Packaging Group Manager, British Plastics Federation; Nick Brown, Head of Sustainability, Coca-Cola European Partners.

Written evidence from witnesses:

- [Just Eat](#)
- [Bio-based and Biodegradable Industries Association](#)
- [British Plastics Federation](#)
- [Coca-Cola European Partners](#)

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Karen Graley; Stuart Lendrum; Robin Clark

Q72 Chair: Good morning. Thank you very much for joining us for our inquiry into the use of plastics, especially single-use plastics, and ways we can reduce and recycle more. Starting with Robin, would you like to introduce yourselves for the record, please?

Robin Clark: Good morning, Chair. Thank you for having us along today. My name is Robin Clark. I am director of business partnerships, restaurant services, from Just Eat. Just Eat is a marketplace takeaway platform with over 100,000 restaurants globally. We have been working on helping restaurants to save money and to provide products and services for them. That is my role within Just Eat. As part of that, we have been leading, on behalf of the 12 million customers in the UK, in taking action on plastic in the takeaway sector. I am sure we can talk about that.

Karen Graley: Good morning, Mr Chairman. My name is Karen Graley, and I am from Waitrose. I am responsible for packaging, the strategy and the targets that we have, both internally and externally.

Stuart Lendrum: Good morning, Chair. I am Stuart Lendrum, head of packaging at Iceland. I am responsible for ensuring that Iceland meets its ambition to be plastic-free by 2023. I have over 20 years' experience across packaging and sustainability within food manufacturing, packaging manufacturing and the retail sector and was a founder member of the UK On-Pack Recycling Label system over 10 years ago. I am currently also an ambassador for the Institute for Global Food Security at Queen's University Belfast, having originally graduated there in chemical engineering.

Q73 Chair: Looking at the graph yesterday, I saw that there is quite a lot of work to do in Iceland to get the amount of packaging down, but it is probably the nature of the business as well. The whole nature of this inquiry is to look at practical ways we can really make a difference, both in reducing plastic and making sure that things are genuinely recyclable, compostable and all those things. Sometimes in wrapping food you cannot always have compostable plastic to do it. Anyway, my first question, which is both to Stuart and Karen, is about how much food and drink packaging you use annually and how much of that is plastic.

Stuart Lendrum: We use just over 13,000 tonnes of plastic packaging, which is the majority of our packaging in total as a business.

Q74 Chair: Naturally, you are looking at that very seriously.

Stuart Lendrum: We have a commitment to be plastic-free on our Iceland products by 2023.

Q75 Chair: Yes, but like all these things it is not just a case of committing to



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it; you have to have practical methods to get to that situation. You have your target. I had better not go into too much detail, because that is probably Alan's question. I will leave you to give the detail of how you are going to get there. What we are really interested in is not just targets, but what you are going to do to get there. I will leave that until the next question. Karen, what about yourselves in Waitrose?

Karen Graley: Currently we use 17,500 tonnes of plastic a year. That is total plastic for own-label products, so not including branded products that we sell and place on the market. That includes the primary packaging, which is the packaging that the customer takes home, but also the secondary packaging, which is the packaging that is used to get the product from our distribution centres into our stores, and the tertiary packaging, which is from our manufacturers through into our distribution centres as well. That is the total plastic packaging that we use.

Q76 **Chair:** If you as a company naturally decide to use less plastic, that will put pressure on your suppliers. What if your suppliers then turn round and say to you, "This will cost us more"? How are you going to deal with that?

Karen Graley: We have reduced our plastic consumption by 1,000 tonnes since 2017, so the figures for 2018 are 17,500. Absolutely, working with our suppliers in collaboration is how we have managed to achieve that 1,000-tonne reduction in primary packaging alone. In fact, in total for all elements it was 1,200 tonnes. We have borne the cost where there has been an increase in cost for that. We have not passed that on to our customers. It is working with our suppliers to look at the best way to do that and how we can mitigate any of those additional costs through all the touch points through the supply chain.

Q77 **Chair:** Naturally, you are probably expecting that other major retailers will do the same, because otherwise, if you are not careful, you become less competitive in the market. Probably Waitrose is at the higher end of the market. You are probably not quite so concerned. Iceland would be in a very competitive situation. I know you compete, but probably for a different type of customer.

Karen Graley: It is probably not appropriate for me to comment on lots of our competitors, but it is obviously very important that we are competitive within the marketplace for our customers.

Q78 **Chair:** What we found when we did an inquiry into Brand Britain is that people like to buy British, but as soon as the price starts to go up they get less enthusiastic. I suspect while everybody naturally wants to use less plastics, they may not be keen necessarily on paying for it. That is going to be an interesting way forward. Once we get to our new system it may not cost more. That is usually what happens. Robin, how much plastic packaging is used by the takeaway food sector?

Robin Clark: In the takeaway sector in the UK, the main issue is twofold. We have the plastic pot in which people typically have a wet curry



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delivered to them. Data is very sparse in this area—and just to remind the Committee, we do not manufacture or supply these plastic pots—but we believe there are about 500 million of those manufactured a year. That equates to about 14,000 tonnes annually produced of these products. They are recyclable.

The other issue in our sector are the foil ketchup and plastic pots for dipping sauces. Amazingly, globally—we have these numbers—about 16 billion of these are manufactured every year. These are scary numbers. When you start to think about the recycling of those sachets, those are often going to be caked in ketchup or other such sauces and, therefore, do not go through recycling.

Q79 Chair: That is right. Is it plausible or possible to make those containers out of biodegradable plastic, or will they biodegrade as the ketchup is in them?

Robin Clark: This leads to some of the action that we have taken in the sector. We occupy an unusual position, because we do not manufacture. We can start to think about other materials that are available. We steered away from composting, because we know that there are not many composting units in the UK and for today's recycling economy we wanted to stay away from that and find a new material.

We ran a global search to find new materials, worked with partners such as the Sustainable Restaurant Association and were invited to work with a company called Notpla, who have been manufacturing seaweed sachets for water, which you might have seen. These sachets have been designed for water. We were able to convert them to transport ketchup and dipping sauces and have run two such trials with those sachets. They have been fantastic. The customer feedback has been really positive: 92% said they wanted to see more and were able to use them as easily as a foil sachet.

When we visited No. 11 to give evidence we talked about wanting to run this innovation and said that we needed innovation in this sector. They were very helpful and very supportive when we applied for an Innovate UK grant. They have granted us a grant for phase three of the trial and we are now trying to scale this as quickly as possible with multiple restaurants and partners from the FMCG world, who can provide manufacturing knowhow, expertise and machines as well.

Q80 Alan Brown: What efforts are you making to reduce plastic packaging in terms of units rather than just making the packaging lighter? What are you doing to source alternative materials for single-use plastics? I will start with Robin. You touched on one product there.

Robin Clark: The other area that we are also looking at is the 500 million plastic pots that are used every year. On the seaweed front we have been able to take that alginate and spray it to a cardboard. That actually washes out through the recycling process, so if it escapes the



waste stream it will degrade much quicker than the 600 years that plastic perhaps would take. We have been able to roll it and apply it on to these materials and we are hoping to see trials on that literally in the next few weeks, so we are very excited about that route.

One of the other partnerships that we are looking at is with an additive manufacturer that has designed a biotransformation process to convert plastic into water, CO₂ and biomass. This is not oxy-recycling. This is not biodegradation. This is a biotransformation. It is in the early stages of an imperial setup, so we are very excited about trialling that with the manufacturer of the plastic boxes.

Karen Graley: As mentioned, we have reduced plastics in the last year by 1,200 tonnes in totality and we are continuing to do that. Our dataset until last year did not go down into the different polymer types, whereas now, working in collaboration with the UK Plastics Pact and WRAP, we have a greater dataset that we can better analyse. We are currently working through what our plastics reduction target will be in conjunction with our targets to 2023. We will be making a public statement around that, but I do not have that for you today.

Q81 **Alan Brown:** Can I ask what the timescales will be for that? If you are still doing that analysis, it is not long to 2023 to get to that point where you are saying you will not have plastics.

Karen Graley: We are not saying that we will not have plastics, but what we are saying is we will reduce the plastics and that will be by 2023. To achieve the widely recycled, reusable and home compostable commitment that we have by 2023, we need solutions for all of our own-label lines by the end of next year, so that is what we are currently working through at the moment. That will be every category and every product. Whether it is a wet or dry good, it will have to fit one of those criteria.

We are also, similarly to Robin, working very closely with a number of manufacturers around alternatives to plastic materials, but also ensuring that where they then go to, once they are placed on the market, they do not cause greater harm than what we are trying to resolve. We do agonise over the decision of placing those on the market. That is why our commitment has been around home compostability as opposed to compostability, because there is a significant difference at the moment. What we do encourage is infrastructure to be developed, continue to be developed and grow for industrial composting, so that then the threshold can be broadened for that.

We have our ready meal trays as an example. Just in one cuisine at the moment we have removed the plastic. That will save 150 tonnes in that one cuisine alone. We are looking to roll that out. That will take time, because it is a totally new development in the market and there will be no plastic within there. It will be widely recycled and also home compostable.



One of the latest developments is a collaboration with a company called CuanTec, which you may be aware of, where we are looking at utilising the waste from langoustine shells to make a material, but again ensuring that, when it reaches the waste stream, it does not contaminate and cause greater issues. There are a number of initiatives like that that we are working on at the moment.

Q82 Kerry McCarthy: Do you still use black plastic for any of your ready meals or some of the higher-end things like asparagus? That is very difficult to recycle.

Karen Graley: We made a commitment in January 2018 that we would remove all black plastic from our business by the end of 2019. I am pleased to say that for 2018 we removed black plastic from all of our fruit and veg and our meat, and this year we will be out of black plastic in totality.

Q83 Chair: You say 2019. We are in 2019 now, so you are confident by the end of the year the black plastic will be gone.

Karen Graley: Absolutely, yes.

Q84 Alan Brown: You mentioned products being home compostable rather than just the definition of compostable, so what does that mean in reality for home composting? What conditions need to be there for the product to properly break down into a natural form?

Karen Graley: There are three routes. We do not like to use the term "disposal", because we do not like to think of anything as waste these days. However, there are three routes our customers can take for the next journey of that material, be it home compostable. One is if they have a home compost facility at home. The temperatures of that need to be maintained to around about 40 degrees centigrade, so the mix of the material that goes into that facility needs to be carefully managed. From the information that we are provided, it means that you can only have up to 25% of a packaging material within that mix for it to work and break down. That will break down within 36 weeks, so it is quite a long process for it to break down in totality. As Robin mentioned earlier, it is about the bio in the organisms to reduce that, so that we end up with nothing, there is no residue and there are no microplastics that are left as residue either. All it would leave would be something that would enhance the soil.

The other route that you could use that for is what we like to call food waste. Our banana bag, which we launched earlier in the year, is home compostable. We clearly mark on there for customers to reuse that bag as a food waste caddy liner, so it goes through into anaerobic digestion. That is again ensuring it is going into a good recycling stream.

Working with the local authorities, there is then the other route of disposal of this into garden waste. We are not encouraging that publicly at the moment, because we do not believe that the facilities want to take that material, but that is something that we are working on



collaboratively and with the UK Plastics Pact. There are three routes to market for that material.

Q85 Alan Brown: You said you would not want to put it in conventional garden waste, so how do you get a clear message out to people or to customers that this is suitable for home compost. Almost by extrapolation, many people would assume, "I can just put that in my garden waste"? How are you going to make that work in practice?

Karen Graley: We have two products that we have placed on the market this year that are home compostable. As I mentioned earlier, we agonise over what we place on the market to ensure that it is not going to do greater harm than what we are trying to resolve. On our banana bag, we have literally repeated "home compostable bag" over the whole of the bag, so it is very clear for the customer to see that it is different. We also clearly mark on the bag that it can be used as a food waste caddy liner, so that it goes through into anaerobic digestion. We are not telling customers to put it in with their garden waste at the moment.

Stuart Lendrum: Our commitment is to be plastic-free and to move out of plastics, so when we talk about the fact that we have reduced and taken 1,500 tonnes out of plastic, that is about moving out of plastic. In terms of what that looks like on the journey to 2023, on those problematic plastics that are already called out as difficult to recycle, by October of this year we will no longer use PVC, by December of this year we will no longer be using black plastic and also by December of this year we will be down to six products still using polystyrene, which is the other plastic that has been called out as problematic. We are making real progress. There is a lot to do. It is a real challenge to move out of plastic, but we are making progress.

Q86 Alan Brown: You have your own roadmap and your own targets for 2023. Is there a reason why Iceland has not signed up to the UK Plastics Pact?

Stuart Lendrum: We are really supportive of ensuring that plastic is recyclable, contains recycled content and all the targets and ambitions of the UK Plastics Pact, but our ambition goes beyond that and is about moving out of plastic. Our ambition goes really far beyond it, and for us it is not about recyclability of plastic. It is about what the alternatives are to plastic. From a resource point of view, that is where we focus our attention, as opposed to on the Plastics Pact, which is focused on plastics.

Q87 Alan Brown: You are saying, from an Iceland perspective, your targets are more ambitious than what is in the Plastics Pact.

Stuart Lendrum: It is more ambitious in the context of moving out of plastic, but not mutually exclusive.

Q88 Alan Brown: Within the Plastics Pact, target 2 is 100% of plastic packaging to be reusable, recyclable or compostable. Target 3 is 70% of plastic packaging effectively recycled or composted, so presumably that



means 30% being reused. How do you define and monitor the reuse of plastic? I will give you an example. We are trying to take plastic bags out of circulation, but many people, once they buy a plastic bag, might use it as a bin liner, so you are reusing it once and then it is still going to landfill. How do you monitor the reuse and know that it is not just ending up in landfill?

Karen Graley: Unless my colleagues correct me, there is no clear measure for that at the moment. That is something that we have fed back through the recent consultations for Defra, Government and HMT, with the plastic tax. It is something that we have said would need to be in place, certainly for us to be able to deliver the plastic tax and to have a minimum of 30% recycled content in all plastic goods going forward. It is something that would need to be put in place. It is very difficult. Because of the recycling system and the processes that are used, it goes back to its molecular structure; unless there is some greater mind than mine, you cannot detect a recycled polymer versus a virgin polymer, and then when you put those two together, I do not believe there is a solution for that at the moment.

Stuart Lendrum: If you look at the level of collaborative activity and the level of investment in research and development across packaging in general, including plastics, what you will see is huge amounts of activity around recyclability and recycled content. There is relatively not a huge amount of activity on reuse. Reuse is one of those areas where there is a real need to seed and stimulate more activity and more collaboration. It is a completely undeveloped system within the UK, whether it is plastic or any other material.

Robin Clark: The takeaway sector is an interesting one for reuse. This is why we act. We have 12 million frequent customers who want us to take action. We ran a plastics hackathon at Imperial College and there were two proposals that were really well thought through around reuse of takeaway boxes, but both of those struggle on the economics, because what you end up doing is putting an entire new infrastructure around something, which inevitably brings cost into the product, never mind the legislation and health and hygiene of the reusing of those boxes. It is a huge challenge and that is why we looked beyond that to try to find a new material.

Q89 **Chair:** One of the issues for me is that because you have the plastics that are now made traditionally from mineral oil and then you have the compostable plastics that are maybe made from starch, you do not want to mix the two together, because you contaminate both. It is always trying to make sure the consumer knows what he or she is going to do with that, and that is a challenge for all of us in Government and councils, but also for you as retailers. What can you do to be absolutely certain?

As long as packaging used for food does not biodegrade while it is in that, biodegradable plastic would work quite well, because you then put it into



an industrial-type composting, which includes organic waste to get the temperature up, so you can mix it all together, whereas you do not want that then to go into a mineral plastics situation, because you have to get the food residue off. I do not know how much detail you have gone into in looking at making sure that the consumer will understand the information you put on to the packaging. Who wants to have a shot at that?

Stuart Lendrum: Iceland is a member of the On-Pack Recycling Label system. The On-Pack Recycling Label system has nearly 400 business members across the UK using a consistent harmonised labelling system on-pack to outline what is and what is not recyclable. In the Government consultations they have highlighted the need and the potential for mandatory labelling. Moving into a mandatory labelling system that is consistent for everybody is really important.

The other thing we have committed to within that is that the current labelling system is a three-way labelling system—not yet recyclable, widely recyclable or check locally, to deal with the variance in infrastructure. That ultimately does not help consumers, because what people want to know is, “Yes or no? Can I recycle that?” There is a real challenge and opportunity to move to a binary system, make it mandatory and make sure that that is harmonised with local authority communications, so you have one consistent communication piece right the way through the journey. The final thing is that there is still a real opportunity for further enforcement on green claims legislation, because there is still a lot of other information on-pack that purports to make claims about its recyclability but just causes confusion.

Chair: I have strayed into the next question, so I will let the other witnesses have an opportunity to answer.

Q90 **David Simpson:** Can I remind members of my interest in the agri-food business in Northern Ireland? The Chairman has touched on this question in regard to food waste. How are you balancing reductions in the plastic packaging with managing food waste?

Karen Graley: Anything that we do where we look to make a change will also take into account looking at the food waste and the shelf life of that product. We will not place anything on the market that will be detrimental to the product quality, the safety of that product and the shelf life of that product. We work very hard to do that.

For instance, we did some developments around a sandwich pack, probably about a year ago, where we made it easier to remove the two materials that make that pack—a very small layer of plastic and the cardboard—so that it is easier to recycle and separate the materials. Then we wanted to take it to the next stage and look at utilising a home compostable material as well, being mindful that sandwich skillets can become litter quite easily. We wanted to look at what developments were there. In doing that, we actually reduced the shelf life of the product by



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75%. Needless to say, we did not place that piece of packaging on the market because it would have been detrimental and would have increased food waste significantly.

Q91 David Simpson: Is there any truth that white plastic is better for food shelf life?

Karen Graley: I have not heard that white plastic or indeed any other particular—

Q92 David Simpson: I understand some time ago the Food Standards Agency had done a report that indicated that there was longer shelf life and it would help with food waste.

Stuart Lendrum: In terms of plastics, anything like that will just be driven by absorption of UV and UV degradation. Typically, in reality, when you are in a chilled cabinet in a retailer, it is the light in the cabinet as opposed to UV that is the dominant source of light, so UV is often a misnomer in terms of food waste.

Q93 David Simpson: To go back, Karen, you mentioned earlier that, in order to get to the targets you were indicating, you are working closely with your suppliers within the industry. I have declared I have an interest in that. The industry, certainly in Northern Ireland, has been indicating that it is looking at reusable packaging, not recycling. As customers come in, they get a plastic bag. Instead of that, they are taking a more expensive bag and they can reuse that. The industry is looking at moving forward with some kind of packaging where customers can come in with their packaging to get their meat to try to cut down on their plastic use. Has Waitrose, Iceland or anyone looked at that or engaged in that?

Karen Graley: Absolutely, Mr Simpson. In April last year we changed our policies internally so that, at all of our counters in all of our stores, customers could bring in their own vessels to purchase from the counter or the delicatessen, whether that be meat, fish or cheeses. All we asked our customers was to ensure those containers were clean and had a lid to stay on. We started that in April last year. We did not publicise that greatly, because we wanted to give customers the choice. It was also based on our experience that a number of our customers had asked us over the years if they could bring in their own vessels to purchase from the counters.

Since then, we have launched a small trial, which we are in week five of at our Botley Road store, for unpacked. During that, we are experimenting with a number of reusable and returnable vessels as well for customers.

Stuart Lendrum: We work really closely with our suppliers. Northern Ireland is a good example, where there is a really innovative supply base looking at the cutting edge around a lot of things, both moving out of plastics and reuse. It is really interesting seeing new businesses coming through to us on reuse as an area. As I said earlier, it is completely



underdeveloped versus all the other activity. The challenge for us is that there is a lot of high-end activity at the moment on reuse, because it is easier to make reusable packaging and sell it almost as a premium offering. The challenge from an Iceland point of view is we have to democratise that and bring that down to something everybody can access, something that works economically for our customers on a day-to-day basis, as opposed to being a more premium offer. That is our area of interest. Generally, it is an area of innovation at the moment, but there is not a huge amount yet on the market.

Q94 David Simpson: Lastly, as regards the cost, the industry always says the supermarkets screw them into the wall when it comes to pricing and all the rest of it. Is there a balance in this between the supermarkets and retailers, with the processors, so that there is a shared cost if there is more cost to be initiated?

Karen Graley: It is only week five at the moment, so there is still an awful lot for us to learn, although we have learned much already; I can assure the Committee of that. Regarding cost, the burden has not backed through the supply chain with our suppliers. When we talk about working collaboratively, that is what we genuinely mean. We are working collaboratively. The cost of the goods we are selling loose at the moment on average is 15% less than what the pre-packed cost would be. We need to learn and understand the volumes that are required. This is where we need to work with the operational efficiencies and distribution supply chain to make sure we get that right, so that we can optimise that and mitigate any of those additional costs going forward. It is just a very different way to trade and to be a grocery retailer.

Q95 David Simpson: I appreciate that. Robin, do you have anything to add to that?

Robin Clark: The only thing we would add from our marketplace is the 30,000 restaurants we work with on the platform are small and medium enterprises, often family-owned businesses. What is great is we often see innovation coming through from them. Reuse, as I said earlier, is very difficult. One thing we have seen at the moment is a reused metal box for a pizza. It is too early to look at scaling, but these are some of the ideas that start to come through.

Q96 Chair: On vacuum packing of food, that extends the life, does it not? Are there any reusable or compostable-type plastics that can be used for vacuum packing? In this inquiry we are very conscious that we do not want to push up food waste by using less plastic. We want to use less plastic. What is the situation? Has there been much research done on it?

Stuart Lendrum: The first story of innovation you will see coming through in what is commonly talked about as either vacuum packing or skin packing will be the introduction of two things: recyclable materials and compostable materials, where you move away from being wholly



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plastic-based into, typically, plastic-paper composites. I think we will see a reduction in plastic and an increase in the recyclability of materials.

Q97 **Chair:** These materials are going to have to be airtight by their very nature, are they not?

Stuart Lendrum: Completely, and that is why the natural process in that context is about achieving recyclability, reducing the overall level of plastic and moving into composites.

Q98 **Chair:** The challenge is to have a product that is either all recyclable or compostable. You do not want a mixture of both, do you, unless you can separate it when you use it? This is the issue for me. If you start to mix them together, you are almost worse than where you started, really. That is a challenge. Would you accept that?

Robin Clark: We look to stay away from the compostability issue. Take the plastic box. That is why we have gone for a card box with a seaweed alginate liner that goes through the existing recycled network so that we hopefully deal with the two issues. We can recycle the box, but if it escapes the waste stream, it degrades much quicker. We know that the infrastructure is not there to deal with the issue of compostability at the moment. Also, do the composters maintain the level of heat required consistently enough to deal with those issues? That is why we went for that.

Q99 **Chair:** Does the material completely break down so that you can then grow flowers or put it on the land to grow crops? These are the issues. It has to be properly compostable and break right down. That is what we have to be convinced of.

Robin Clark: That is where we are looking at this new biotransformation process, which breaks the carbon rings. We are not calling it compostability. In fact, something we are starting to think about is whether we actually label the packaging with a "recycle by" date as opposed to a "use by". We could start to help customers understand that they need to do something about that packaging by a defined date.

Chair: That is an interesting point.

Stuart Lendrum: On all of that, I would just say it is easy to end up oversimplifying it as a discussion about compostable plastics and recyclable plastics. If you stood back from it, you would say that fundamentally the challenge is that we have too big a range of materials. That makes whatever we are doing with them really complex, from a point of view of sorting them out, dealing with contamination risks and making the next stage of the process economically viable. With the sheer range of materials we have, it is not so much an issue about compostable versus non-compostable. It is just about the range of materials, particularly in the context of plastic.

Chair: We have to be careful. You in the retail industry have to be careful



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that we do not promote something as either compostable or recyclable but in the end it does not really happen. It is a case of ticking the box. We all feel better, but, in reality, are we better? A lot of our recycling did not actually recycle here. It all got sent to China. There are all these things. In this inquiry we are trying to look at something that will be really practical, hence you are getting those questions.

Q100 Mrs Murray: Can I turn to cost? Some people believe that loose vegetables, for instance, cost more than pre-packaged vegetables. Why is it cheaper to buy fruit and veg pre-packaged in plastic?

Karen Graley: Certainly from our experience with the Botley Road trial at the moment, which is still in its infancy of course, we are not experiencing that to purchase loose product is more costly than pre-packed. Thinking about the experiences and the change that would need to happen through supply chain and operationally, that is where the cost would be incurred. If we take a pack of peppers, for instance, typically you may buy a pack of three and they could be all different colours, so it is offering the customer the choice and the variety as well, and the convenience of buying that one. To manage that through the supply chain, you could imagine they are all loose. They are being contained in a larger container. There may be a liner that goes with that. There could then be another liner that goes on the top of that, when you have a crate on top of another crate. That is where some of the extra costs historically have been brought about for loose products.

It is about the manhandling of that and the stock rotation as well. As they are not date-labelled, it is about the manpower and labour required to check the quality of that, whether it be a fruit or vegetable in this instance, to make sure it is being sold at its best and that we are rotating in the right way to mitigate any food waste. That is probably where some of the cost has been borne in the past.

It is also then for us to consider how we share storage information with our customers when we remove the packaging, which is one of the things we are learning. There has been very constructive feedback from our customers on the Botley Road trial about how we convey those other important messages around minimising food waste and storage and usage, in addition to not having any packaging there.

Q101 Mrs Murray: Do you think that pre-packaging can sometimes contribute to food waste as well? For instance, if I wanted two carrots, I may very often have to go into a supermarket and buy a bag full of carrots, and possibly I am just using that over the weekend. I go away, and that creates more food waste. Does that get taken into account as well?

Karen Graley: Typically, in an average Waitrose store, we would have a number of loose fruit and vegetable items. There are also the counters I have referenced. If a customer wanted to purchase one beefburger or two sausages, that would be the opportunity to be able to do that. We



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offer that choice where customers may want to buy more regularly and in smaller portions, so I do not believe it would drive the cost.

Stuart Lendrum: From an Iceland point of view, our produce offer is a pre-packed offer, as opposed to a combined loose and pre-packed offer. Because of our heritage in frozen food, we are very proud of encouraging our shoppers to use frozen as a way to buy and manage and be able to only use what they need. That is our approach.

Q102 **Mrs Murray:** Do you have anything to add to that?

Robin Clark: I do not think it is one for us, but thank you.

Q103 **Chair:** Do we not have to change our whole philosophy? In your packaging, you take it to a factory, you put it in plastic bags, and a lot of it is done by machinery; you then put it on a pallet; you very often shrink-wrap the whole thing; you put it on a lorry and take it to the big retailers. It all works really well because it is very cost-effective, but it uses a lot of plastic. We have sleepwalked into using more and more plastics, have we not? We have to wake up and come out again. I am not sure you are quite getting to grips with the whole process, because it suits you very well to buy very cheaply.

In terms of the cost of processing through mechanical, putting into bags, then putting on the pallets and coming to the big retailers, it works very well from a financial point of view, but it does not work very well for the amount of plastics used. When a pallet arrives at Iceland or Waitrose, to what extent are you looking at that to see how much plastic is wrapped on the pallet? How much is then wrapped, in terms of your carrots, your potatoes or anything else that will not necessarily need to be in plastic bags? How much are you actually challenging that? Instead of recycling and reusing, it would be better not to use it in the first place. How much are you trying to not use plastic in the first place?

Karen Graley: We are absolutely looking to reduce and remove wherever possible, not just in the items that our customers take home but also, as I mentioned earlier, in terms of the secondary and tertiary packaging elements that are used within the supply chain. We have not only removed and reduced plastic packaging for primary. We have also made a reduction in what comes into our distribution centres and from the distribution centre into our stores. We typically use cages from our distribution centres through into our stores, so they are obviously reusable small vehicles in a way, rather than adding further plastic and packaging to that.

All of the plastics, the cardboard and the waste we have within our distribution centres or at the back of our stores are also collated. They are baled and recycled too, at our expense. We ensure that they go in the right places to be dealt with in the most appropriate way. We will not place a product on the market for the consumer to reduce the amount of packaging, or indeed plastic, used at the detriment of somewhere else



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within the chain. We look at that all the time to make sure it is not going to be detrimental anywhere else.

Q104 **Chair:** Does Iceland do the same?

Stuart Lendrum: It is exactly with what you have described in mind that we have a commitment to be plastic-free. The reality is that we work right the way through the supply chain.

Q105 **Chair:** You get my argument. It is all very well to say you are going to be plastic-free. Government can sign up to any target they like, but they have to have a method of getting there.

Stuart Lendrum: It is only by understanding the relationships and the interdependency of all that material through the supply chain that you can get on that journey to being plastic-free. We look at the whole thing. Going back to one of the earlier questions and points, the supply chain probably is the big area in the UK where reuse is really prevalent. It is the big part of the sector where reusable packaging is the norm. There are lots of lessons there in terms of driving through reuse on the one hand, but equally, we look at every single piece of packaging and every single material—all of that plastic, all the way through—because it is only by understanding that we will get to plastic-free at a product level.

Q106 **Kerry McCarthy:** We have touched a little bit on reusable packaging. You mentioned the tin pizza box and so on. Could I ask how consumers have responded to some of the initiatives? Iceland has a deposit return scheme, has it not? Waitrose has been looking at refillable options. My perception is that there will be a small proportion of customers who perhaps will respond to that and be organised enough to do that, but it is how you get past that first tranche and make it more widely acceptable.

Stuart Lendrum: We were the first retailer to start trialling deposit return schemes, and we were taken aback by not only the response to it but the consistent response—over time, it has not tailed off. By the end of May/start of June this year, we will have taken back in over 750,000 plastic bottles, which is phenomenal. We are really proud of that. The customers have absolutely bought into it. We sit at a consistent level of what is coming back. It has settled down and become part of what people do. That is the challenge for us—we see it as how this becomes normal. How do we make this just part of what everybody does? Our evidence so far that we have shared with Government as part of the consultation process is that it really works. We are hugely supportive of deposit return.

Q107 **Kerry McCarthy:** How much do you give them per bottle?

Stuart Lendrum: We are giving them 10p. I think that is one of the things still to be set within the scheme. That is the difference, and one of the things we will see in the work that has been done on deposit return. At the moment, that is not a deposit return. It is just reward. The



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challenge for us is to introduce a system that sets the deposit at the right level and in such a way that it is valued enough to encourage take-back.

Q108 **Kerry McCarthy:** With Waitrose, you have refillable options in some stores.

Karen Graley: We have, yes.

Q109 **Kerry McCarthy:** That might be a bit more challenging.

Karen Graley: It has been very encouraging for the short time that it has been available to our customers in the Botley Road experience. At the moment 50% of our customers are already reusing packaging, so they are bringing back their own containers already. Just in a four-week period, 50% of the customers are reusing. There is a great desire and aspiration for customers to be able to do that. In talking to some of the customers in store personally as well, where they may have 11 or 12 different pieces of packaging they have brought in, a lot of them they have not purchased from us. Some are reusing maybe ice cream tubs or a butter carton as well, so they are being quite creative in how they are doing that. As long as it is anything that is resealable, the customers are at liberty to bring those in and refill them.

Q110 **Kerry McCarthy:** Then it is done by weight. How do you factor in the weight of the container they have brought back? Presumably, that is how it is done; you weigh what they have bought.

Karen Graley: Yes. We call it the tare weight of the packaging. We try to keep it as simple as possible for customers, because it is a very different way of shopping for many customers. We ask that they put the container they are using—whether it be their own, one they are purchasing from us or one they are borrowing from us—on the scale. It would then come up with the weight and what the price for that weight is. They then put that sticker on to the container. They would then select which product they would like to buy, whether it be a frozen item—we have a selection of frozen goods—or whether it be some dried goods such as pasta or a pulse, or indeed coffee. Then they would literally turn this little vessel tap to get to the quantity they would like. They can pop that back on the scale. If you are looking for a recipe for ingredients, you can check the amount you are having. To your point earlier, you can buy exactly the amount you require, rather than more. Then you would literally subtract the initial cost of your pack from the cost of your goods, so you are only paying for the cost of goods, not for the cost of the packaging.

Q111 **Kerry McCarthy:** That is sorted out at the till. They know how to do that there.

Karen Graley: Absolutely, yes. I have probably made it sound more complex than it is actually, so apologies, but it is very straightforward. It is literally a three-step process for customers: weigh the empty container, place the goods in, reweigh it and then you pay.

Q112 **Kerry McCarthy:** How does it work for the frozen products? If they are



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in a freezer, do they not have some sort of packaging on them already, because otherwise everything would stick together, would they not?

Karen Graley: The products are loose at the moment. We have large trays that are probably what you would find in more wholesale. We have some strawberries, mango, raspberries and cherries that customers can use with a scoop to select what they want.

Q113 **Kerry McCarthy:** If you get a pack of frozen peas, sometimes you have to bash them quite a bit to get all the peas to separate. That is my experience.

Karen Graley: That is due to temperature control. Customers love it, and the replenishment has been far greater than we initially anticipated.

Q114 **Kerry McCarthy:** That is in the Oxford store at the moment.

Karen Graley: In the Oxford store at the moment.

Q115 **Kerry McCarthy:** What are your plans to roll that out? You said it has been four weeks so far, so it is early days.

Karen Graley: It is four weeks at the moment. We are looking to trial that through to 11 weeks so that we have some really good qualitative and quantitative research, insight and feedback from our customers. Then we will look to see what the next steps for that are, also bearing in mind that we do not want any detrimental or unassociated waste with products where they have been loose. We are also thinking about how we then get those products through to a greater number of stores.

Q116 **Kerry McCarthy:** We have had a bit of a plastic-free Parliament process. In terms of us taking away meals from the restaurants, there has been resistance to anyone bringing in their own containers on health and safety and hygiene grounds. There is a bit of concern at the moment about people wanting their KeepCups refilled without having washed them out properly. If someone was to bring in a container that was not pristine, how would you deal with that? Is there a risk of food poisoning or hygiene issues?

Karen Graley: That is a very good question. One of the things we have trained our partners to do in those instances, from back in April last year on the counter, is, should a container not look clean, we would offer to rinse or wash that container for the customer.

Q117 **Kerry McCarthy:** So you are looking at scaling it up, and you think this is worth doing.

Karen Graley: Yes, absolutely. The feedback and take-up from customers has been overwhelming. We need to ensure we implement it in the right way. I think everybody would appreciate that doing something for one store is far easier than rolling that out to 300 or 400 stores, with different store formats as well.

Q118 **Mrs Murray:** How would you deal with food allergies in that instance? I



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am thinking of peanut allergies or pulse allergies; maybe something would get mixed up. We have heard a lot in the news about foods not being labelled for those who have allergies, but surely you might have cross-contamination.

Karen Graley: In terms of the products we have chosen at the moment, we have over 200 items that we are selling loose in that one store for this trial. We have specifically selected those products so that there is no risk of contamination or allergen, so there are no peanuts or anything like that at the moment. That is a greater challenge for us as we look to scale that. As we all know, it is a very complex issue. By starting with coffee beans and some pasta, we can gauge customers' appetite for that and allow them to experience that and that change in behaviour in how they shop.

Q119 **Dr Johnson:** I am just thinking about the practicality, because it sounds like it works really well if the person who comes in is awake, concentrating, switched on and focused on what they are doing. For me, sometimes I go to the supermarket late at night or with three children, and there is a significant chance that I will put the container full of food before I remember that I was supposed to have weighed it before I filled it. I cannot tip it back because I am going to contaminate it. I cannot then weigh it. I wonder how you would manage that.

Also, with allergens, if somebody puts items that they pick up into a plastic packet they have not cleaned properly that has some sort of allergenic material in it that they put in their packet before, which is something you cannot really control for, and they say, "Actually, I did not need four of them. I only need three," or the kid has put one in and then they put it back, how do you protect those people? It is the logistics of it. It sounds great when everyone does it properly, but the reality is people will not.

Chair: Caroline could mess up your system here.

Mrs Murray: I thought we might like to go and try it.

Chair: Yes, exactly. That is right. We will send Caroline in to test it.

Karen Graley: Marvellous. One thing we have done is have more partners in those areas. In the refillable station, as we call it, at the moment we have more partners on hand there to help customers with that. Interestingly, on the point about time and having young children with you, one of the customers I spoke to had two little girls. I said, "Do you mind me asking how you are managing with this? How is it working?" She literally had eight containers with her. The little girls were interacting with mum. It did not take her any longer. She was very happy, and she commented that the cost of goods was very reasonable. It is just about that change in behaviour. It may take a little longer at first. It is a little bit like taking our reusable bags with us when we go shopping. It is one of those things we have become accustomed to.



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Q120 **Chair:** Before we leave this question, Stuart, you talked about 750,000 bottles you had back. I am interested in what you actually do with those bottles. The whole idea of a deposit return scheme is to try to make the same bottle out of the bottle that is returned, hence some companies have reverse vending machines. It is not just about you collecting those bottles. What do you actually do with them when you have them?

Stuart Lendrum: Yes, absolutely. One of the benefits of that deposit return approach is that you are collecting really high-quality, consistent material, so you know you have a massive—

Q121 **Chair:** Do you make the same bottle again?

Stuart Lendrum: We are not in a position to dictate that. We are in a position to get it back into the PET food recycling stream. It is food grade, really good quality PET. It is able to go back into food grade PET recycling.

Q122 **Chair:** That is the key to this, to make sure it does not go into the normal recycling of plastic, which is a very low grade, is it not? The whole idea is not just making us feel good about returning the bottle, but that you do something positive with that. Customers are going to need to be reassured on this, so they do not think they are just doing it for the sake of it.

Stuart Lendrum: That comes back to the point that when you have lots of different types of plastics and lots of contamination, that makes it harder, versus collecting PET bottles that are all food grade and really good, and it really easy to do the right thing with it.

Q123 **Dr Johnson:** My question is about plastic tax, which I think you alluded to a little bit earlier. Do you think a plastic tax is a good idea?

Stuart Lendrum: From our point of view, anything that encourages people to consider options other than plastic and ensures people are using plastic recycled content is a good thing. The challenge is that, on its own, it is not enough. We would want to see that plastics tax come through at the right level so that it drives behaviour change. Equally, we want to see more investment and more activity around industry collaboration on alternatives to plastic. We have to do both. Instead of just taxing one, we have to work on the alternatives at the same time.

Robin Clark: I would support Stuart's point. We have been involved in the consultation and have written a submission to it. It is the right approach. However, there are some flaws with that consultation at the moment. As Karen alluded to earlier, we do not see a way to be able to vet whether there is the 30% recycled content at the moment. Also, given that we are all talking about food, food safety is an issue. We cannot package recycled content.

Possibly another major issue is that there was not an actual number put on the tax, so we cannot estimate what the impact was. If that tax was



applied even at some arbitrary level, certainly within our industry, which is extremely competitive, with small and medium businesses trading on tight margins, that tax will end up feeding through to the customer in the end, which of course is not the desired approach. It is exactly the right approach to start with tax, but again, just routing back to our approach, we have to try to find alternatives. We cannot recycle our way out of the issue.

Q124 Dr Johnson: That was the second half of the question. Will it change your behaviour any more than you all already sound like you are trying to, or will it just cost the consumer more to buy their food?

Karen Graley: We are all actively looking to use recycled content where we can. Take, for instance, the bottle Stuart has been talking about. Typically, you would find between 30% and 50% recycled content in those bottles already. That is probably round about a good recycling rate for what is recycled currently and is on the market and available. To take that any higher, we all need to work and encourage recycling rates.

On Robin's point around the food safety aspect, there is very little recycled content that is food grade at the moment. There would need to be some change in legislation and policy around that, which we have fed back to HMT as well. We would like to be able to use more recycled content wherever we can, and certainly in anything that we deem is absolutely necessary and would still be a single-use piece of plastic. However, we need to look at the complexities around that to enable us to do that. We would encourage that. Whether there is a need to pay more for something if you are already actively doing something is a question.

I would also ask that, within the extended producer responsibility, we look at the additional costs, to make sure anything is aligned with the plastic tax, so that there is not a duplication of taxation through the supply chain, or indeed that could be passed on to a consumer.

Q125 Dr Johnson: If I was going to ask the question in a controversial way, I would ask whether there is any evidence that adding a tax will make you remove plastics any quicker, or is the political pressure and pressure from your consumers already there to make you do that? In which case, is it just a way of raising revenue in a way that is apparently virtue-signalling?

Robin Clark: If I may, that is why we were acting before the consultation on tax was ever even mooted. We have 26 million consumers on the platform. Our customers are deeply passionate about this. Quite frankly, if we did not take action, we might face a bigger issue of lower demand. If we can respond to that, that gives us a competitive advantage, because we are acting in their interests, and that is what we are here to do.

Stuart Lendrum: Setting the tax at the right level is a huge opportunity. Set the tax at the right level and it will do two things. First, we will drive



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people to make different choices on materials, and it is a really important opportunity. At the same time, it will effectively drive innovation in other materials, because it is the opportunity cost, i.e. I sit and pay the tax, or I try to innovate my way to alternative materials that mean I am not subject to that tax. If we get the tax at the right level, this is a huge opportunity to drive change and support innovation and investment in alternatives.

Q126 Dr Johnson: You think it will drive innovation that would not otherwise happen.

Stuart Lendrum: It has the potential to if it is set at the right level.

Q127 Chair: It makes other materials more competitive then. On setting the right level, what is the right level?

Stuart Lendrum: That is the \$1 million question. In the consultation documents we have all fed back on, there is still a lot of unexplored detail around the level and aspects around the difference between, for example, plastic packaging that is produced and filled in the UK versus plastic packaging that is produced and filled in Europe. There is a real opportunity in the detail to make sure we do this in the right way that will really make a difference.

Robin Clark: The question from Robert Jenrick was, "Can I not just tax that plastic box?" The simple response was, "That would end up costing the small and medium businesses," but there is also no alternative. That is why we led the call for innovation. Yes, tax will support innovation, but it has to be at the right time and there has to be an alternative.

Q128 Chair: Yes, I understand that. Karen, in one of your answers you talked about us having to move to much more recyclable plastic. How much is the onus on you, as the retailer, to know what happens to that recyclable plastic? In the past we have all been very keen that, "This is recyclable, so it is excellent." We had no idea, and you as retailers had no idea, what actually happened to that. Did it go to China? Did it go to the Far East? Where did it go? How much is it the responsibility of you—not just you as Waitrose, but retailers generally, and Iceland and others—as to what happens to that recycled plastic to make sure it genuinely gets recycled? I think the public have woken up to the fact that just because it says "recyclable", that does not mean to say it genuinely gets recycled.

Karen Graley: There is the OPRL scheme, the On-Pack Recycling Label scheme. With Stuart, we were founding members of that. It is very important to us to ensure that we label the products correctly and make it easy for our consumers to be able to put that piece of packaging into its next journey. As I say, I do not like to use the words "dispose of" necessarily. It is absolutely vital we get that right.

Q129 Chair: Yes, you have to get that right. You have to get the information to the consumer. Surely it is also a responsibility now for you to know that plastic is genuinely being recycled. I know it goes through local



authorities. It goes through a process very often, but there has to be more onus on the retailer as to what happens to that plastic. We have used far too much plastic. Now everybody has woken up, partly because it is consumer driven, and partly by the fact that the public have worked out that we must, quite rightly, use much less plastic, and it must not get into the water and the sea. Surely you, as retailers, are partly to blame—not you personally, but retailers generally are to blame for using as much plastic.

Karen Graley: As part of the producer responsibility, we have responsibility for the materials and goods we are placing on the market. To your point earlier, Mr Chair, we need to remove what we can, and then we need to make sure we reduce where we can, reuse where we can and recycle where we can. The other element is that we are rethinking a lot of that.

Q130 **Chair:** Do you understand my argument? It is not about the process. A lot of this is process. It is a process of recycling, and it ticks all the right boxes, but to what extent are the retailers responsible for making sure that, in the end, the plastic that was said to be recyclable was actually recycled and did not end up in landfill or get sent to a part of the world where they may not recycle it? That is the sort of thing where we need reassurance. You need to be able to be clear, when you put all the labels on, that that does happen.

Karen Graley: The labelling system is based upon the current infrastructure, so what is happening within the UK recycling system. As Stuart said earlier, there are the three tiers at the moment. We are encouraging moving to more of a binary labelling system so that it is very clear that something is either recyclable or not recyclable. We need to work hand in glove with the recycling and waste management companies to ensure that what we are labelling is correct and what we are providing them with are materials they can handle, so they do not need to do something else with that. It is very much about a collaborative piece of work now, and going forward even more so, to ensure that these materials are not ending up somewhere they are not intended to be.

Stuart Lendrum: It is with all that in mind that we get to the position of saying, “We have to turn the tap off. We have to start using less plastic.” I agree with what you are saying. When you look at the National Audit Office research and report into the PRN system, that showed the issue, this complete lack of transparency around where material goes to and that export market that was effectively palming it over the wall.

Chair: Yes, making it somebody else’s problem.

Stuart Lendrum: From our point of view, all of those complexities and issues are why we want to turn the tap off. We have direct control over the plastic we capture within our business. We know where it goes to. We know exactly what happens to it. Once it moves out into the wider system, that is where the NAO report shows that issue. The reform of



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extended producer responsibility within that is the real opportunity. It is important for everybody to have that transparency, not just us as retailers. We have to be sure what is happening to material and where the money within the system is going so we can make sure it is being spent appropriately and that ownership of material—that absolute certainty that says it is being collected, it is being recycled and it is being recycled into the right things—is there for everybody to see.

Q131 Alan Brown: Stuart, I think it was you who commented earlier that there are so many products on the market. That makes it hard for customers to understand which stuff can be recycled and which stuff cannot. Also, different local authorities do different types of collections. What can be done in terms of labelling to make people understand what can be recycled and how it can be recycled?

Stuart Lendrum: It is three things. We need fewer materials. We have to simplify the material mix of what is being used. We have to simplify the labelling to support that and move to a binary system—either it is recyclable or it is not—and make it mandatory, so it is the same labelling on every single pack that is on sale in the UK, and get rid of the proliferation of other information that is not backed up. The final thing is we have to make sure that the communication that comes through for people at home from the local authorities matches the information that is on-pack. If you look at any one of those areas, there is an opportunity to improve versus where we are today. We are not at the mandatory labelling system yet, we are not yet at the binary labelling system, and we still have too many different materials. A lot of the challenge at local authority level is more about the communication feeling different, as opposed to people doing different things. It is a concerted effort across every aspect of that.

Q132 Alan Brown: When you say mandatory, you mean it simply needs to be a law.

Stuart Lendrum: Yes, absolutely.

Karen Graley: Absolutely, we would support that, moving to a binary label as soon as possible so we make it easier for consumers to understand what to do with the material and a piece of packaging. The only thing I would add to Stuart's three elements is that infrastructure needs to align with that as well, to ensure that the materials being placed on the market are labelled correctly and clearly and are then dealt with in the exact appropriate manner.

Q133 Alan Brown: Stuart, Which? did an investigation into supermarkets' own-label recycling information, checking it for accuracy. Out of the 11 supermarkets it looked at, Iceland were bottom of the pile, with only 38% of the samples labelled correctly. Do you accept that, and what is happening to sort that?

Stuart Lendrum: That is a good example of the cyclical nature of updating labelling of products. Products, depending on whether they are



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being chilled or frozen, go through a life cycle, and the labelling is only updated within the context of that life cycle. You are typically on somewhere between a one-year and three-year cycle of updating information. Between now and December of this year, we will have changed and updated about 40% of our packaging on shelf. Walking into Iceland today versus walking into Iceland in December this year, you would see a very different picture in terms of our labelling. Absolutely, we are fully committed to making sure our labelling is up to date, accurate and consistent, but that cyclical nature of packaging updating is right across the packaging sector. Everybody is in different stages of the cycle.

Q134 **Alan Brown:** If you are at 38% just now, you are saying you will have changed about 40% of the labelling by the end of this year.

Stuart Lendrum: About 40% will have changed.

Q135 **Chair:** Is that 40% of the 38%?

Alan Brown: That is where I was going.

Stuart Lendrum: No, that is 40% out of 100%.

Q136 **Alan Brown:** Where is that projected to? You have to get to 100%, right?

Stuart Lendrum: The target is absolutely 100%. We want every label on every pack to be right, up to date, consistent and easy to read.

Q137 **Alan Brown:** Karen, I noticed Waitrose was fourth bottom of the pile, at about 47%. What steps is Waitrose taking?

Karen Graley: Similarly to what Stuart has said, there is a cycle for packaging. Having 17,000 own-label lines, we do not update all those every year. Obviously, we also would not want to create any further waste or write off those packaging goods because a label change takes place. In the natural cycle of a category, a redesign or a repositioning of a brand, then we would look to update all the labelling. I believe a number of the elements that were selected for the report were from a range we have not touched for some time that we are relooking at for next year. It is something we were disappointed by, because we try very hard to ensure the labelling is correct, but, as the landscape changes and materials have different classifications, they are not always necessarily aligned together as much as we would like.

Q138 **Alan Brown:** Can I ask each of you how aware you were within your supermarket branding that there was this issue that the labelling was not accurate and had to be rectified? It seems that it has come out in the public domain because of Which?, but you either knew about it and it has taken a long time to do it, or it has come as a surprise.

Stuart Lendrum: As members of OPRL, we get independent audits of our packaging by OPRL.

Q139 **Chair:** What is OPRL?



Stuart Lendrum: The On-Pack Recycling Label system. That is the voluntary system that exists in the UK today. We go through independent audits as part of that process, which gives that update. The challenge is within that cycle of change, where you are not touching every product every year. You have an awareness of things you need to update across a range of aspects, and that is part of it. We do that against the background of changes in the labelling designations themselves. We focus so much time on making sure—it is really important to us—that the information on our packaging is right for our customers. It is absolutely part of the day job for a lot of people. We will keep working on it until we get 100%.

Q140 **Alan Brown:** Through this audit process, you were well aware that this has been an issue, presumably for some time.

Karen Graley: The thing to add, is obviously there is much activity going on in this area at the moment. The material classifications, as Stuart says, are changing and the necessary label change does not happen at the same rate. It is something that we would be conscious of. For instance, with labelling for small flexible pieces of packaging that can go in with carrier bag recycling in our stores, there have been some changes there around what will and will not be accepted. Again, it is about trying to keep all these things aligned. With 17,000 own-label lines, it is a task. It is something we are aware of and conscious of, and we have a desire to ensure it is better than it has ever been.

Q141 **Chair:** Following up on what Alan said, naturally, as a retailer, you would be confident to label your products—the meat or the apples or the pears—as being exactly what they are. We, as consumers, would expect to buy that. Why do we not expect the packaging to be labelled properly as well? Surely, to a degree, you are misselling, albeit the packaging. All of you are under 50% and you do not seem to be that concerned. Why have you got to that situation? Obviously, your eye was off the ball. You are not giving us any dates of when you are going to get to a much higher percentage. Do you expect a pat on the back for going from 38% to 40%?

Stuart Lendrum: We will have touched 40% of our products in totality, so our aim is to get to 100%.

Q142 **Chair:** But when?

Stuart Lendrum: From where we are now, we will have touched a further 40% of our products by the end of this year. That is a huge scale of change for a business like ours.

Q143 **Chair:** Is that 78% altogether? Is it the 38% you have now and 40%? There are too many percentages being thrown around here. We want a total 100%. Where are you going to be in total?

Stuart Lendrum: When we look at where we are on the audit the OPRL does on us as a member, our aim is to be above 90%. That is an audit of



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all our products, not a small selection of products, which is what the Which? survey is.

Q144 **Chair:** By when?

Stuart Lendrum: By the end of this year. In terms of that process of updating our packaging, from our point of view, we will be at the upper end of accuracy.

Q145 **Chair:** Waitrose, where would you be?

Karen Graley: It is not where we would like it to be, of course. Some of the products out there will not have been updated for between three and five years. That is why we have this misalignment. It something we are looking at and we are encouraging to have that updated as soon as possible. It is one of the reasons why we support the change to the binary label as quickly as possible. That will mean we will be updating all our packs, so the level of accuracy will be far greater and we will be at that 100%. With a change like that and it also being mandatory labelling, as opposed to voluntary labelling, it will mean the focus of attention will be far greater, not that it has not been a focus.

Q146 **Chair:** It does beg the question of why you are in the space you are in. If this pressure had not come from the public and from the desire to have more recycling and less plastics used, I am not sure we would be in this position. Why have you got into that position—and not just Iceland and Waitrose; why have we generally taken the eye off the ball?

Karen Graley: I would not say we have taken the eye off the ball.

Q147 **Chair:** You would not be in this situation if you had not taken the eye off the ball. We pick up a package of apples, pears, meat or fish and expect it to be what we think is in it. Surely, the packaging should also be accurate. If you do not label the packaging, in some ways that is fair enough. Once you label it, it should be accurate.

Karen Graley: I absolutely agree with you; it should be accurate. The information we are giving the consumer should be 100%. That is what we are looking to get to. We will do that as quickly as we can.

Stuart Lendrum: If you look at information that is legislated and mandatory on-pack versus information that is voluntary, regardless of subject area, you see two totally different levels of accuracy, completeness and detail. The sooner we move to a mandatory system, that will drive the checks and balances more completely, right the way down through everybody involved in the process. There are many touch points.

Q148 **Alan Brown:** You have both said you are in favour of mandatory labelling, but you admit you have problems now. If mandatory labelling comes in, will there not be an argument to say, "We will still need three years to change our product lines, because we cannot change it overnight"? Although you say you welcome mandatory labelling, will



there not be some sort of resistance?

Stuart Lendrum: It is not about resistance. Whether it is about updating information on packaging or updating information the local authorities give, there is a balance to strike between how quickly you are trying to drive change and the cost to implement that change. That is a national debate to be had, but we want our labelling to be right today, not in three years' time.

Karen Graley: Absolutely. After recent changes in the food information regulations a number of years ago, we had an 18-month period where we needed to update all our labels to warrant that and fulfil that. If we have mandatory labelling, it will be relooked at, and it needs to be 100%.

Q149 **Chair:** I am not convinced by your mandatory labelling. It should be done, but why should it be mandatory? Why should you not have done it yourselves? By saying it must be mandatory, you are almost copping out of the whole thing. Why should consumers be confident that when they buy, they are getting what you are selling them? At the moment they are not, in terms of the packaging. It is similar to the product. It is not as essential, but it will be if we are genuinely going to reduce plastic and recycle more. You should have done more yourselves. You are putting pressure now, but I think you are putting pressure now because the public is putting pressure on you. I wonder why you did not act sooner. Why mandatory? Why pass the buck to the Government or anybody else? You are the retailers. We expect you to supply us with good product. Surely that is enough, is it not?

Stuart Lendrum: We are committed to putting labelling on all packing and making sure it is accurate. That is why, on a voluntary basis, we already do what we do. That is why, on a voluntary basis, we are members of the On-Pack Recycling Label system, because we are committed to that. Could we have done a better job in terms of the report that Which? put out? Of course we could. When we look at the work we do with OPRL more directly, that gives us a different view on how we are doing at an overall level. We could do a better job, yes, until we get to 100%. We are not there yet, but we are absolutely committed to doing it. That is why we, off our own back, are part of this.

Chair: You are on record with what you are going to do. You are going to achieve it by the end of the year, so we will watch you with great interest.

Q150 **Mrs Murray:** How do you work with local authorities to improve customer information and labelling? I think you have covered some of this.

Stuart Lendrum: The biggest opportunity is to make sure local authorities have both the information and the funding to update their labelling and their communications so it is consistent with the information on packaging. Trying to move to consistent information, so people are getting the same information on their packaging as they are getting from



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the local authority about what can or cannot be recycled, is really important. It is hard for local authorities to make those changes. They have lots of competing pressures on what they do with the resources. There is an opportunity through the update to producer responsibility to make sure all the funding is in place, so that we have really good communication systems, local authorities have the funding to do those things and there is consistent information on-pack, mirrored by what you receive at home.

Q151 Mrs Murray: Do you engage with the Local Government Association, for instance, so that you are dealing with all the local authorities and not individual ones?

Stuart Lendrum: Through our membership of OPRL, OPRL works with LARAC, the Local Authority Recycling Advisory Committee, and the LGA as well.

Karen Graley: It is the same for Waitrose, as a founding member of OPRL, working very closely with the local authorities.

Robin Clark: I have nothing to add on this one.

Q152 Chair: Finally on that one, it is not your problem, but in England we have so many different local authorities. Some will incinerate; some will do all sorts. A lot of us came up through local government, so we want the autonomy that local government has. On the other hand, what we recycle up here in London and where we put it is totally different to what we do back in Somerset and Devon. How do we get to a situation where the consumer can understand what the local authorities are doing better? Can you put pressure on local authorities?

Stuart Lendrum: When you see the consultation document on achieving consistent household collections, that sets out the framework to make sure there is that balance between autonomy and having a consistent set of materials that are collected everywhere. Somewhere along the way it tries to strike that balance. Extended producer responsibility sets out putting the funding in place to support that.

Karen Graley: Absolutely, I support what Stuart said. We need to make sure we have the labelling piece accurate as well.

Chair: Thank you all very much. That was a very good evidence session. We have plenty to put into our inquiry and plenty on record, so thank you very much.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Andy Sweetman, Barry Turner and Nick Brown.

Q153 Chair: Welcome, gentlemen. Would you like to introduce yourselves?



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Nick Brown: Good morning, Mr Chair, and good morning, Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to come and talk today. My name is Nick Brown. I am the head of sustainability for Coca-Cola European Partners in Great Britain. Coca-Cola European Partners is a company that manufactures and distributes products for the Coca-Cola Company and other brand owners in Great Britain. We are delighted to be here today. We are at a point in time where we have a great opportunity to help shape the policies that will improve recycling for the next 10 years or so. I am delighted to go into more detail on the written response we have given.

Chair: That will come out through questioning.

Andy Sweetman: I am Andy Sweetman from the Bio-Based and Biodegradable Industries Association. The job that pays me is that I work for Futamura up in Cumbria, where we manufacture renewable and compostable packaging films.

Barry Turner: I am Barry Turner. I work for the British Plastics Federation. I have spent over 30 years in the packaging supply chain, working in companies manufacturing both packaging machinery and packaging materials.

Q154 **Chair:** Thank you very much, gentlemen. My first question is fairly straightforward. When is plastic food and drink packaging necessary and when are alternative materials better? I will add another part to it. Why have we got ourselves into this situation? Is it because plastic is very cheap?

Barry Turner: The use of packaging materials serves a purpose, because supermarkets and retailers do not buy packaging. They sell goods, and packaging has a purpose in terms of protecting those goods and making sure they arrive in the consumer's home in a fit state to be consumed. Why has plastic grown in the way it has and become such a popular choice? It has grown because it is very resource-efficient. If you look at any metrics from an LCA point of view, it uses the least resources possible in the process. It is much lighter than the other materials typically in use and it has lower impacts in terms of, most importantly, greenhouse gas emissions. It is very flexible. It can be used for packaging fresh foods and controlling the rate of moisture loss in a way that ensures we can consume our food when it suits us, because we all live busy lives. I do not know about most people, but I am down here today, I was here yesterday, and I will be going back to my home later in the week.

Q155 **Chair:** I accept that it is a very good product and it does its job, but how have we got to a situation where, over the last 20 to 30 years, it has virtually taken over the world? Then we have had all the problems with it getting into our rivers and water.



Barry Turner: It is a variety of factors that I have mentioned. It does such a good job, in terms of making sure we can consume when we want to consume. It is convenient, and that is a lifestyle thing. It has been responding, and the retailers and everyone have been responding to the way we live our lives. Because it is so versatile, the material has been able to respond to that situation. We can always look at what we would have done differently as we went through these journeys. You touched earlier on reuse and things like that. There are plenty of opportunities to innovate further.

Q156 **Chair:** That probably is a good chance to bring Andy in. What are the alternatives? I accept that we have to make sure food is safe. We have to try to keep its shelf life as long as possible. We do not want extra food waste, but we want less plastics and less non-recyclable and single-use plastic. What is the solution?

Andy Sweetman: I would endorse what Barry said. In terms of the technical performance of plastic materials in a packaging context, they are the reference point. The kinds of materials I represent are the fruit of recent research and development. They did not really exist 15 years ago, and they are evolving all the time. If you go back a couple of years, we could not produce the same level of moisture barrier properties or gas barrier properties as a conventional plastic. Now, in many cases, we can, but there are exceptions. For example, if you said to me, "Should we be making a water bottle or a drinks bottle out of a bio material?" I would say no, because they do not have the right functional performance and will probably get in the way of an existing recycling infrastructure. We see our materials being a key element of the future of the wider plastics industry and fitting into key application areas where we solve a problem. The last thing we want is to get in the way of a good system, wherever there is a good recycling system.

Q157 **Chair:** It is difficult, but how do you stop the contamination between the mineral plastic, oil-based plastic and your more compostable and biodegradable plastic? How do you stop that happening?

Andy Sweetman: For us, the key thing is around labelling. To a degree, we aspire to make our materials look transparent like a plastic in many cases. That can cause some confusion, so the key thing is around labelling. I know you had a debate earlier about mandatory versus voluntary. From my perspective, I do not really care whether it is mandatory or voluntary. We need to see a harmonised labelling system that we can all adhere to within our industries, which allows us to make that differentiation effectively.

Q158 **Chair:** Nick, from your point of view, you are mainly trying to get to a situation of genuinely recycling that bottle, rather than a biodegradable compostable plastic.

Nick Brown: Yes, specifically on the issue of biodegradable plastics.

Q159 **Chair:** Do you go to glass? What do you do?



Nick Brown: It might be interesting for the Committee to know that we still use more glass packaging in Great Britain than we do anything else. We sell nearly twice as many cans as we do plastic bottles. It is really important that any policies and any work we do on sustainable packaging works across the various different packaging formats. In terms of the bioplastics question specifically, as Andy said, we have looked at a material called PLA, which is a biodegradable plastic, but it did not have the functionality we needed. It did not keep the carbonation in the product. We will keep looking and innovating, and we will keep working with groups.

To reiterate, you need to make sure it is kept separately and does not damage the recycling streams. You need to make sure you are not giving a rationale for someone to litter the package as well. On that consumer engagement point of view, you have to make sure it is communicated clearly.

Q160 **Chair:** When we go to a supermarket, we buy four, five or six bottles, all wrapped in plastic usually. When we buy cans, they are all connected together by plastic. Do we need to do that?

Nick Brown: Our larger multipacks are packed in cardboard rather than plastic films, but the smaller ones are in plastic films. We are going through an assessment at the moment to look at how we can transition to board, and we will do that.

Q161 **Chair:** One of my pet subjects is plastic coated cardboard. Is that necessary? If you are not careful, you are going to go from one thing to another. We have to look at this whole thing in the round. Do you look at that as well?

Nick Brown: We do.

Q162 **Chair:** It looks flashy with all the coloured photographs on it. Do we need that?

Nick Brown: That is not a pack format we use. We have a commitment to use 100% recyclable packaging, as well as a target to recover all the packaging we use so that more can be recycled, and none ends up as litter. We think it is really important that, if you want to encourage a circular economy, you need to have good eco-design principles. That is one of the things we hope will come through very clearly in industry's responses to the EPR consultation.

Barry Turner: On the coated board, we have to be careful we do not forget about the functionality of the packaging. There are a number of very good reasons why coated board might be used in some applications that are in contact with food. Then there is a challenge of how you separate that plastic from the board and do not end up with a format that is less recyclable.

Q163 **Chair:** That is right. That is my point. We do not want to jump out of the



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frying pan into the fire just because it looks like it ticks the right box. That is what we are trying to get to the bottom of in this inquiry.

Barry Turner: There is a real risk. I applaud the efforts of people to highlight the issues we definitely need to deal with, but there is a danger that people jump out of one material into another and there are unintended consequences. As a matter of interest, we talked about the amount of plastics, but in terms of our waste stream, if you look at our total waste we generate as a nation, it is 2%. If you look at the amount of packaging we use, it is 20%. That is clearly based on weight, but that demonstrates—

Q164 **Chair:** Plastic is very light of course, so therefore that masks a little bit of the actual—

Barry Turner: Indeed, but for very good reasons: it uses less energy to produce, so less carbon emissions.

Chair: You can carry it on a lorry and there is less of an environmental impact. You are doing a good job to try to sell your plastic—I will give you that—but we need to reduce it, and I think you accept that.

Q165 **Mrs Murray:** Have packaging producers focused too much on reducing the weight of plastic packaging, rather than reducing the actual numbers of packaging items produced?

Barry Turner: That is a very good question. The waste hierarchy obviously starts with focusing on reduction. That is one of the ways you reduce—by lightweighting. I do not think they have been wrong to focus on that, because resource efficiency and the way we consume resources across the planet should be at the top of everyone's priority list. Where we need to do better—we touched on it earlier—is making sure we close that loop at the end of the circle. I do not think they have done anything wrong by focusing on reducing. That is the start of the journey. We should not sacrifice functionality or food waste in that journey, or indeed our opportunity to recapture the resource at the end of its life.

Andy Sweetman: I would agree with that. We have seen a lot of that over the last 10 years or so, in terms of a reduction in the thickness of materials and so on. Where we are now is a fundamental review. If I take one example I am close to, we have a development where a customer is changing its pack formats so it can take its plastic film out wherever possible. Where it cannot—where it is absolutely required—it is switching that into biodegradable and compostable film in the same thickness and weights they already have. We are going on to the next level now, but it has certainly happened over the last few years.

Q166 **Mrs Murray:** Nick, you clearly are doing your best to use cans and glass bottles. Do you have any plans to phase out plastic bottles? What is the purpose of plastic bottles?



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Nick Brown: There are two main reasons that we use plastic bottles in the beverage industry. One is around safety. The idea of using a glass bottle or an aluminium can in many applications is not practical. The other one is the environmental impact that Barry mentioned. The environmental impact of a plastic bottle rather than an aluminium drinks can is maybe around half, and it is the same for our glass bottles. A wholesale move from plastics into one of the existing alternatives is not necessarily the right long-term solution. Different models we are looking at are things like how we could use refillable packaging and what the right refillable packaging for the 21st century is. Some of those will still use plastic as a material, because it has some very useful properties.

Q167 **Chair:** A bit like we are going to have water fountains in all our towns, which we had for years and do not any more, how practical would it be to come to the big retailer with a Coca-Cola bottle and refill it?

Nick Brown: One of things I have brought along today is what we have been using increasingly across Great Britain, which is a refillable bottle that has a tag in the bottle. It is charged up a bit like an Oyster card. A consumer will buy one of these and will use that to buy their soft drinks. I have water in mine today, but with our smart dispensers it could be any of the products from the Coke range. We have been doing that at Reading University, and we have also been doing it at some festivals and events. We need to understand how consumers are going to respond to refillable packaging. It is a new way. It is a different way.

Q168 **Chair:** How are you finding the response?

Nick Brown: Our initial findings were that you have to work really hard on communications. We found that many people, when given that choice, might still decide to buy their product from a cup. Others liked the convenience of the plastic bottle or the can and were buying the product elsewhere and bringing it on to the sites where we did it. We have learned and evolved the second phase of the programme, where we spent a lot more time explaining the concept and the commercial and environmental benefits of it. Interestingly, we had to address some of the same concerns that were raised in the previous panel about health and safety.

Chair: How clean the bottle is and so on.

Nick Brown: We put in place wash stations and things like that.

Chair: That is very interesting.

Q169 **Alan Brown:** In terms of recycling, different organisations put out different statistics. It is really hard to get a handle on what percentage of plastics are recycled and how much plastic food and drink packaging is actually recycled. Then there is the other thing the Chair touched on earlier, which is how much is recycled in the UK and how much is exported and what happens to it once it is exported. There are quite a few variables there. I do not know if you want to have a stab at that.



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Barry Turner: There should not be confusion. The Defra figures and the way those are assembled show a recycling rate for plastics. That includes exports, and it shows a rate that is widely available for everyone to see. In terms of the export, certainly we do rely on exports too much. Around about 60% has traditionally gone to the export market. One good thing that has been highlighted—if you can call it good—is that for a long time we have been saying to Government, since about 2012, that there need to be tighter controls in this area. Now we have seen the consequences of not having tighter controls in the export of our waste, most recently featured on BBC TV.

Q170 **Alan Brown:** You are saying that the Government need tighter controls, so therefore it is the Government's fault, not industry.

Barry Turner: No, everyone has a part to play. When Government put legislation in place—any sort of legislation—there has to be an enforcement regime. We have supported that enforcement regime as an industry. We have provided information too about where they should look to audit. Regretfully, the fact of the matter is that we have now seen that that regime maybe needed tightening up somewhat. We have our recycling rate of 46%. Roughly two-thirds of it at the moment is reliant on exports, which is something we did not want to see as an industry. It is something that has resulted in a lack of infrastructure and investment in the UK. We are pleased that in the current consultations, we might see some attempts to rectify that and direct some money into the infrastructure that is needed in the UK.

Nick Brown: Getting hold of valid data to help us drive the right decisions is a challenge for us. While the current producer responsibility scheme obligates companies to report what they put on the market, they only have to report it at a reasonably high level, so “plastics”—you do not know what type of plastic it is or what type of application. There is no obligation on those that reprocess to explain and report how much they have reprocessed. It is a failing in the current system, and it is something that I think many in the industry have fed back—we certainly have—as one of the main things we have to get right in the new schemes to make sure that reporting obligation is clear.

In terms of the role of Government, waste and resources touches so many different parties—the packaging producers, the retailers, the consumers, local authorities and waste management companies. There needs to be a mechanism for joining those all together so they can collaborate in the right way. That is where you get the proper data from. You need the data from everyone to be able to map what is really happening.

Q171 **Alan Brown:** Barry, I see you were kind of nodding in agreement with what Nick was saying there. Fundamentally, Nick was saying there is not clear data and it is difficult for you as an organisation, but yet initially you said there are clear available figures for recycling that are readily available.



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Barry Turner: There is lots of data out there, even split by polymer type. Valpak do a lot of work in conjunction with WRAP to identify the split of the data. There is lots of data out there. Could the data be better? Always, but it was quite obvious from the recent investigative TV programme that a reporter could even identify where some waste had come from and went to by looking at waste flow data. There is lots of data out there. It is how it is used at the moment. Could it be improved? Yes. We put that in our submission and some suggestions as to where it could be further improved. There is lots of data there already, but we are not using it terribly well.

Andy Sweetman: The only thing I would add to that is we have to get beyond just looking at collection rates. We need to get down to what recycling rates are as well as collection rates. They are not the same thing, as we have come to see.

Q172 **Chair:** I suppose I have to put the same fairly hard question to you that I did to the retailers. Is there not more of a responsibility when you manufacture to know that a product is going to be recycled properly if it says so? It is no good just putting it on your packaging, it ticks the box and in the end it lands up in China or somewhere in the Far East in landfill or whatever.

Barry Turner: It comes back to how we operate. All packaging is produced on an international scale. As a country, we import 50% of the packaging we use in this country. That is a function of the way brands operate. If we are going to move towards universal labelling, one thing you have to bear in mind is that these brands are working across the whole of Europe, and the whole of the world in some cases. If we just narrow down to Europe, even though we are about to exit that stage, the fact of the matter is—

Chair: We have got this far this morning without mentioning the B-word.

Barry Turner: I know; I apologise, Chair. If you look at the rest of Europe, we are in a minority in terms of what we collect when it comes to plastics. We are part of the third that are not doing a very good job in terms of the collection of plastics for recycling. That is why we need this consistent approach to the collection, because if you do not collect it you cannot even begin to recycle it.

Q173 **Chair:** You accept that you as a manufacturer, along with the retailers, have to put more pressure on the whole system to make it work.

Barry Turner: We are working with the Plastics Pact and organisations like the retailers and the brands to move on that journey. We fully support that direction of travel.

Q174 **Chair:** You are putting pressure on to do it, rather than being reticent to move from your plastic packaging that you are so keen on.



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Barry Turner: There would be something wrong if I was not keen on it. It is about time to leave the industry.

Chair: You can see where I am coming from.

Barry Turner: The fact of the matter is that all the resources we use on our journey through life have to be minimised. Plastics offer us a real opportunity to do that if we treat it in the right way, recapture it and put it back to use again. That is the main challenge that everyone needs to face up to.

Q175 **Chair:** Would you agree with that?

Andy Sweetman: I would agree. The biggest change I have seen over the years is, being a packaging technologist, people would always ask me the technical properties of a material. Environmentally, among our customer base, was of secondary and very minor importance. Now it is right at the forefront. It is the first question, alongside the technical performance questions. That has led the manufacturers to make those changes and to change the thinking.

Q176 **Chair:** Commercial pressure has come along.

Andy Sweetman: Yes, commercial pressure has changed dramatically, and thank goodness.

Q177 **Kerry McCarthy:** This is probably one to start with Barry on. It is about kerbside collections and the fact that there are so many different schemes operating. I think there are over 300. I know Defra, going back to the days when Rory Stewart was Minister, was particularly keen on trying to rationalise that. How big a problem is the fact that there is so much inconsistency as to what is collected where and what is done with that?

Barry Turner: If I may, I will use the example of Wales, in terms of the recycling rate it has achieved. It has managed to achieve that through a consistent approach to collection of materials. It is now the third in the world in terms of recycling performance.

Q178 **Kerry McCarthy:** Is that consistent across the whole of Wales?

Barry Turner: It is virtually there. It has taken a consistent approach. It has put money behind it to reward councils that move to that consistent approach. It has the right infrastructure in place. The results are showing. I think the most recent stats I saw for Wales for all recycling were 57%. I think England's is 45%. That shows what an impact a consistent approach can have. That is why we are so keen on a consistent approach. It does not confuse the consumer. They know what they can do. It is more consistent with the approach of best practice in Europe. That is the direction of travel we need to take.

Q179 **Kerry McCarthy:** With Wales, you said the Government invested in it. Did they have to put money into buying out contracts? The Environmental



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Audit Committee did an inquiry into single-use plastics. One of the things we heard was that some of the contracts would be 20 or 25 years long. It is very difficult. You cannot just switch to somebody else that does it another way.

Barry Turner: Indeed, it takes time. I hope that when EPR is revised it will speed that process up. Collection contracts are typically seven years. There is a period of time that is needed before you can transition that. Obviously, all councils are at different stages with those collection contracts. Disposal contracts can be a lot longer. It is a challenge, but at the least the Government have recognised now that it is a challenge that must be tackled. We fully support it as an industry, because it is the only way you will ever move to optimal levels of collection and recycling.

Q180 **Kerry McCarthy:** We are not going to meet the 2020 targets. I do not think England is going to meet its 2020 targets.

Barry Turner: England is not. That is why we, as a trade organisation and a membership organisation, are looking at what we can do by bringing the whole logistics chain together in the interim. There is an argument that says we cannot really wait until the EPR system is revised.

Andy Sweetman: I wholeheartedly agree with what you have just heard. Again, there is the complementarity between a conventional plastic for recycling and a bio material for recycling via organic recycling methods. We need consistency across the country and simple labelling so the consumer simply knows, "That is a conventional plastic and I do this with it. That is a bio material or food waste and I do that with it".

Q181 **Chair:** How many local authorities at the moment can differentiate between recyclable plastic of a mineral kind, an oil kind, and a compostable one?

Andy Sweetman: The reality is almost no one.

Chair: Yes, exactly.

Andy Sweetman: That is why it is critical. Industry has a role to play, absolutely. Our association is ready to engage with all stakeholders and the conventional plastics industry, the waste management and the local authorities by whatever vehicle is possible. We have to do that. If we get the labelling right and we have the infrastructure right, it is not difficult to do.

Q182 **Kerry McCarthy:** It is consistency throughout, in terms of fewer variations of the products that are out there. Particularly, mixed use is a real pain, when you have sleeves on drinks bottles and so on. You need as much consistency as possible—consistent, clear labelling so that people know what to do, then consistency in terms of the recycling collections, so that people know, wherever they are in the country, whether something is going to be recyclable or not.



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Andy Sweetman: That is right. One of the things I know our association and the BPF have talked about is applications. From a consumer point of view, it is easier to think about, "This is a bottle. I know what to do with a drinks bottle," than it is to start talking about PVCs and polystyrenes and PPs and whatever. They all look the same. If you concentrate on the applications, you can make life much easier.

For example, we have all gone coffee-mad over the last few years, so now you have lots of coffee capsules. If you have a readily recyclable coffee capsule, recycle it. If you have a compostable coffee capsule, great, because, let's face it, the contents are 25 grams of coffee and just four grams of capsule. You should not have what we have a lot of at the moment in this country, which is a conventional plastic holding food waste that you cannot do anything with. Let us really think about the applications together. Which application makes most sense for which type of material? When we get down to it, there is a lot of commonality in our views on that.

Q183 **Kerry McCarthy:** When you say, "Let us think about this" and "We need to do this," how does that happen? Is it just the market, businesses and organisations like the one you represent responding, or is there something that needs to be done to either make this happen or encourage it and nudge it along a bit further? There will be a lot of companies where the prime thing they will care about is whether their product looks good and whether it is going to make people buy it. How do we get that consistency if it is not Government saying, "You must do it this way"?

Andy Sweetman: From the compostable point of view, we need labelling, and we have proposals on a simple label system that is harmonised with the OPRL systems we about heard earlier. We need that to be recognised by consumers and the waste industry. Then we need a joined-up approach in terms of the actual composting and organic recycling infrastructure. For example, in the UK we are very strongly down the anaerobic digestion route only or composting. The model is to link the two together, to combine AD with traditional in-vessel composting, as is done in The Maltings in Selby in the UK. Both systems are put together, which means you get the energetic value from the waste and the food waste, and then you get the secondary soil remediation benefit from the composting phase. All the compostable materials are suitable when you do that.

Q184 **Chair:** I think you would accept that, if you get too much compostable plastic mixed with non-compostable plastic, you are actually making it more difficult to recycle.

Andy Sweetman: Yes. There is a bit of a misconception that compostables are getting in the way of plastics. I wish our industry was big enough to do that. We are not, in reality. We are an emerging industry.



Q185 **Chair:** You will be if you emerge. That is why we have to have separation.

Andy Sweetman: Categorically, we do not want to interfere with any good recycling system. If there was a voluntary code of conduct that said we should not be involved in plastic drinks bottles, our industry would sign up to that wholeheartedly.

Q186 **Dr Johnson:** My question is about labelling and who you think is responsible for ensuring it is properly labelled, so that the customer has the information they need about food packaging. Who do you think is responsible, or should be responsible, for ensuring that the labelling is done properly? Do you think it should be mandated and, if so, upon whom?

Barry Turner: It comes back to collaborative efforts across the supply chain. That is the most important thing that has emerged from the current debate: that people are now talking to each other much more than perhaps they have ever done before. I am not saying that was right, but there was not enough collaboration. The fact of the matter was there needed to be more. I would suggest there is innovation required on some of the challenges we face as well, in terms of separation of materials and sorting of materials.

Although labelling can help, we are dealing with people who are living busy lives, and you have to have a fall-back. I would suggest it is not beyond the wit of man to come up with ways of identifying products in such a way that they do not contaminate different streams. You touched on black plastics earlier. Even that problem was solvable, but we have an infrastructure that is very conservative, not wanting to invest. We have to break through that and make sure the right investments, the right labelling and the right sorting and separation are there. It is a combination of all those things. Although labelling will help, you will still need another stage.

Q187 **Dr Johnson:** If I understand it rightly, you are saying that the recycling factory processing the waste will be able to find a technological solution to separate all these things, so it does not matter, but that is not going to happen overnight. In the meantime, the information on what the packaging contains is already available, but not provided. I understand what you are saying about everyone needs to do it collaboratively, but my experience as a paediatrician tells me that children have more accidents when lots of people are looking after them than when one person is. When one person is, they are entirely responsible. Otherwise, people think somebody else is doing it. The same is true of labelling. If it is not somebody's specific responsibility, is it going to happen? It is not, is it? We are all talking about it. Everybody is talking about it.

Barry Turner: It will happen, in my view. It will happen and is happening. All people have to take into consideration is that labelling reflects not worst practice but where we need to be. We do not want



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barriers to innovation. You have to have a labelling scheme that is very responsive. We live in the age of apps and things like that. We have to get smarter in the way we communicate with consumers. The apps I have seen around labelling should give us an opportunity to make it very regional, reflective of what is available in that area, and it can be updated. If we rely on printing labels all the time and updating old labelling formats, we will find we will probably need a smarter technology than that to allow us to innovate and tackle the problem.

Q188 Dr Johnson: How will you innovate for people using plastic who do not have smartphones, do not use apps and do not use the internet?

Barry Turner: There always has to be a fall-back, because not everyone has a smartphone. I totally accept that.

Dr Johnson: Or wants one.

Barry Turner: Or wants one—maybe not. We probably rely on those far too much, but the reality is that they are in common use and we should be using them more to communicate important information about where you can recycle stuff. We should make it easier for consumers. A lot of the challenge with consumers is that we have made it far too complicated for them. All they want to know is, “Can I recycle that or not where I live right now?” That is a challenge and that is why you cannot have one labelling system that goes right across the country.

Q189 Dr Johnson: Is that accurate though? If you had a labelling system that said, “This is X type of product,” and then the council provides the information on which type of products are recyclable, they can compare the label on the product to the information they have received from their local district council and say, “Yes, this is a type of plastic I can stick in that bin. Oh no, it is not. I will put it in the other one.” That is not terribly complicated, is it? It does not require an app.

Barry Turner: There is information like that available from councils at the moment, in terms of what you can and cannot recycle. Everyone has that if they choose to access that information. I come back to the busy lives people live. We have to make it easier for them. When we have consistent collections and when we are collecting what we should be collecting for recycling, it will be an awful lot easier. We are in that transition phase at the moment, that awful phase where it has taken a long time to get a consistent approach to collections on the table but it is now on the table, thank goodness. We will get to a consistent collection of recyclable materials. Then we can have the labelling and it can be on the product, but we are in that awful phase of transition, I am afraid.

Q190 Dr Johnson: Are there any other thoughts on labelling?

Andy Sweetman: Those are the issues. There is identification. Labelling is critical. Whether it is mandated or voluntary, one system that we all adhere to throughout the whole of the industry is key.



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One thing that may help with misthrows, which I think is what you are talking about, that we are seeing emerging in terms of technology is a way of having a kind of chemical marker inside the packaging that can be picked up at the waste management phase. Let us imagine you put a compostable into a classic plastic application. As it runs through, its chemical marker will mean it is then pulled out. There are technologies emerging on this through the Ellen MacArthur Foundation projects, which are working on a lab level. Obviously, it needs to be scaled up, fully practical and cost-effective, but technically there are things that can be done.

Q191 **Chair:** It might be fairly expensive at the moment, I imagine.

Andy Sweetman: Absolutely, yes. It is an emerging technology.

Nick Brown: Our view on engaging with consumers is that labelling is absolutely an important place to do it. You need a very technical message that says—not very technical, quite precise. It does not need to be overly long or complicated, just about whether it can be recycled where you are, with the facilities there. The On-Pack Recycling Label does that. We found from feedback from our consumers that there was still some confusion, and the question often was, “Why? What is the benefit? What happens to it when it is recycled?”

In terms of engaging more members of the public to use the services we have, labelling is one important place, but there are many others as well. We have put more messaging on our products alongside the OPRL, but it is also important that, whatever reform of the producer responsibility scheme comes, sufficient money is put aside not just to mandate the labelling rules but also to engage at that more emotional level as to why consumers should engage with the services that are provided.

Q192 **Chair:** The green dot does not necessarily mean the packaging is recyclable. It signifies that the producer has made a financial contribution towards recovery and recycling of packaging in Europe. If I saw a green dot on something, I would expect that to be recyclable. Is that green dot necessary? Is it confusing? Should we change it?

Barry Turner: It comes back to the earlier point that brands operate on a territorial basis. Unfortunately, they do not operate on a UK-only basis. What we do in terms of infrastructure, around plastics in particular, in terms of what we collect, should reflect best practice in Europe. At the moment, we are in that third poor category where “could do better” is—

Q193 **Chair:** Therefore, using the B-word again, after Brexit we could alter the labelling if we wanted to.

Barry Turner: You could try to take the brands in that direction. I would suggest it might be better to look at best practice in Europe, which we are doing now through these consultations, and take that journey and get a consistency in collection, and drive the material through.



Chair: We will park it there, because we are conscious of time.

Q194 **Alan Brown:** Andy, this question is directed just at you. In terms of composting packaging, is that any better for the environment than recycled plastics? The reality is that consumers might throw them in the wrong bin. We heard earlier from Waitrose where they are looking at home composting, but in actual fact that product needs to be in a compost bin at 40 degrees centigrade for X weeks. I want to ask about the specifics of that versus recyclable.

Andy Sweetman: The first thing to say is that I think Karen was talking about optimised home composting conditions. Home compostable materials do not need that. If it is warmer, they will go quicker. That is the key difference. We view home composting as being an interesting stepping stone right now while we sort out the infrastructure and logistics issues. For us, it is about having a proper organic recycling system in the UK that any compostable material that has passed the key standard¹ is suitable for, and that is how we turn this into a proper waste management process and not just a short-term stepping stone towards it.

In terms of composting versus recycling, I am coming back to what I said before, which is, in terms of recycled materials, where it is practical to do so, let us do more of it, absolutely. Where you have high levels of food contamination or where it is a very small-format material like a sweet wrapper, or where you have coffee pods and so on, that is where compostable, organically recyclable materials come into their own. In that sense, they are just complementary to good use of plastic in the right places.

Q195 **Chair:** Surely it is absolutely essential, again, to get it in the right bin and then to be collected separately. Otherwise, it could be counterproductive. I think you would accept that.

Andy Sweetman: It is.

Q196 **Chair:** We are not there at the moment, are we?

Andy Sweetman: We are not, but we do not think it is rocket science. As we already move towards greater food waste collections, our vision is simply to say, if it has the right logo on, it is recycled with food waste for those types of materials. Let us say a twist wrapped sweet for example—

Chair: Yes, it goes straight into the food waste.

Andy Sweetman: Put it into the food waste. Away it goes. It is easy for the consumer and it is clear: "Recycle with food waste". If it is not the right material for that, identify it for proper recycling, as we need to do. They are complementary materials.

Q197 **Chair:** It is making sure the consumer does it right. Otherwise, if you put

¹ BS-EN-13432.2000



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it into the food waste and it is not compostable, that is a problem, is it not?

Andy Sweetman: Yes. When we have the food waste bins, which are happening more and more, we have a recycle logo that says “food waste”. Let us use that type of logo directly on the packaging as well. Then it is, “Oh, here we go”.

Q198 **Chair:** We are back to the argument of some consistency in labelling basically, so it can be easily recognisable.

Andy Sweetman: Exactly, yes.

Q199 **Chair:** Is the 30% threshold for recycled content in the plastic packaging tax going to make a difference to the packaging produced? Should there be modulated fees for different amounts of recycled content?

Barry Turner: The plastics tax, in terms of the stated objective, is well-intentioned. As you heard earlier, it has some challenges. We are heavily dependent on imported packaging in this country—30% of all the packaging we use is prefilled. That part of the equation is not going to suffer a tax, which means it will favour imports over home-produced packaging, or the filling of that packaging. That will have consequences, in our belief. We think there might be some movement of jobs overseas to exploit that loophole.

The tax is also a fairly blunt instrument, because we know that in certain formats you can achieve more than 30%. In any other formats, you cannot achieve any percent because of food contact issues. From a point of view of whether it will work, whether it will drive investment where it is needed or whether it will just pass unnecessary costs on to the consumer, there is a real risk.

Q200 **Chair:** Your argument is that it has to be a lot more thought through than it is at the moment.

Barry Turner: Absolutely, yes.

Q201 **Chair:** Is that Andy’s view?

Andy Sweetman: I would agree. Our industry believes in extended producer responsibility on this aspect, absolutely. We want to see the infrastructures come into place. We want to contribute and play our part in that. The 30% recycled content is very difficult. As a film manufacturer, we simply cannot do it. We would never have food contact regulations passed if we did that, because we do not know the origin of that recycled content, even if we could use it. It is not necessarily the right instrument, but we absolutely endorse the need for our industry to pay our way in this.

Q202 **Chair:** Very quickly to Nick, why should glass and HDPE bottles be managed through extended producer responsibility rather than a deposit scheme?



Nick Brown: We are involved in lots of deposit return schemes around the world. When glass and HDPE, which is typically used for milk, are included in a deposit return scheme, collecting them—the actual return points in the retailers—is more complicated. You need more space and more specialist equipment if you are going to work with glass. Also, there are hygiene concerns over milk and therefore HDPE.

The other issue is that glass can often contaminate the other materials. You can easily collect cans and PET bottles together and separate them. If you start mixing in glass, you can often end up with shards of glass in there, which is a real problem for handling further on. We think the best way of improving recycling of glass and HDPE is through the household schemes, with a properly funded EPR scheme.

Q203 **Chair:** Is Coca-Cola doing the reverse vending machine for plastic bottles?

Nick Brown: Yes. As well as those schemes we are involved in around the world, we have been doing some testing and trialling in Great Britain with the Merlin group.

Q204 **Chair:** Is it working?

Nick Brown: We are finding that people are very excited and very interested about it. We have used it to get across the message of why recycling is important. The other thing you learn from the tests and trials is how the machines work, how they need to be maintained, how you empty them and how reliable they are. That is one of the reasons we are doing it. I know that is one of the reasons lots of the retailers are doing it as well, to see, when we do have a deposit return scheme, how well prepared we are to know some of the operational challenges that will need to be overcome.

Chair: Thank you very much, gentlemen. Your evidence fitted in very well with the first evidence we had from retailers this morning. We look forward to taking your evidence. It will make part of our report when done. Thank you very much.