

Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee

Oral evidence: Plastic food and drink packaging, HC 2080

Wednesday 17 July 2019

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[Watch the meeting](#)

Members present: Neil Parish (Chair); Alan Brown; John Grogan; Kerry McCarthy; Mrs Sheryll Murray; David Simpson; Angela Smith.

Questions 205-356

Witnesses

I: Dan Roberts, Vice Chair, LARAC, Jacob Hayler, Executive Director, Environmental Services Association, Richard Kirkman, Chief Technology & Innovation Officer, Veolia UK & Ireland, and Councillor Peter Fleming, Deputy Chairman, Local Government Association and Leader, Sevenoaks District Council.

II: Dr Thérèse Coffey MP, Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for the Environment, and Chris Preston, Deputy Director Resources and Waste, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs.

Written evidence from witnesses:

- [Environmental Services Association](#)
- [Veolia UK & Ireland](#)
- [The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs](#)

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Dan Roberts, Jacob Hayler, Richard Kirkman and Councillor Peter Fleming.

Q205 **Chair:** Welcome, gentlemen, to our inquiry on plastics. It is a pleasure to have you all here. Starting with Jacob, would you like to introduce yourselves for the record, and then we will get moving?

Jacob Hayler: I am Jacob Hayler. I am the executive director at the Environmental Services Association. We are the trade body that represents the waste and recycling industry.

Richard Kirkman: I am Richard Kirkman. I am the chief technology and environment officer at Veolia, which is a waste management, water and energy company.

Chair: Quite a large one.

Cllr Fleming: I am Councillor Peter Fleming, leader of Sevenoaks District Council, and I am speaking on behalf of the Local Government Association.

Dan Roberts: Good morning. I am Dan Roberts. I am vice-chair of LARAC, in a voluntary capacity. By day, I am the waste and recycling team manager at South Staffordshire Council.

Q206 **Chair:** Thank you very much. First, what impact would obliging producers to cover the full cost of packaging waste disposal have on local authority finances? How could that additional funding be managed and used to improve recycling? You can have a shot at that one if you like, Peter.

Cllr Fleming: I think there is near universal agreement that the producer should pay 100% of the costs, as that will be the only way we can fundamentally move the debate on. Until that sort of level of scrutiny and cost is passed to the producers, most of what they are doing is lip service. As to what local authorities will do, the great thing about local authorities is that there are different local authorities and they will find different ways to spend the money—all of them brilliant, I am sure.

Q207 **Chair:** From a practical point of view, it is about how you would divide it. Basically, if you had a tax on the original plastics, that would go through to Government. It would go through the Treasury, I imagine. Then it would have to be carved up. I imagine that each authority would work out roughly the amount of plastics it has had. How would you get your hands on the money?

Cllr Fleming: The Government has as long track record of promising local government money that doesn't appear.

Q208 **Chair:** Don't worry—I spent 12 years in local authorities, so I understand these matters.



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Cllr Fleming: I wouldn't pre-suppose coming up with a system. After a few years, we wouldn't see any money anyway. We are not counting on the cash—that is the most important thing. What we are saying is—

Q209 **Chair:** It sends the right message.

Cllr Fleming: Absolutely. A move to 100% producer pays has to be the message coming from Government.

Q210 **Chair:** Then, I suppose, we have to take an average of the cost. How do we get to the cost of disposal, from putting a tax on it?

Cllr Fleming: The way that local authorities are dealing with what is in fact a market is the other part of the problem. To conflate two children's games, we are in a game of pass the parcel where we are piggy in the middle. We have to collect and we have to give it to the market. Whether the market is or isn't there has a huge difference on the relative finances of local authorities.

Q211 **Chair:** You don't want to put a ridiculous amount of tax on it; you want a reasonable amount. I also think that it will probably start to divert people—processors, retailers and others—away from plastic, so it is a double whammy, but you have to set it in the right way. In this inquiry, we are looking not only at recycling plastic but at whether we can use less plastic in the first place. That is where I see that it could be quite useful.

Cllr Fleming: That is precisely where we need to get to. We need to get to a point where we don't have the amounts of plastic entering the waste stream in the first place. Currently, all the stuff that we have in place is about solving a problem downstream. This would solve the problem upstream and get us to a place where we didn't have the problem to deal with.

Q212 **Chair:** As far as people like Veolia are concerned, what sort of effect will it have you have on you? I suppose that you will be the contractor for council collection. How do you see it effecting you?

Richard Kirkman: As you know, there are two main tranches to the proposals from DEFRA and HMRC. One is the extent of the producer responsibility scheme, which is ring-fenced. The idea is that it is a trading scheme and the money doesn't go to the Treasury. Manufacturers have to pay for all the packaging that they put on to the market, as they do with the current packaging tax. It covers all materials—plastics, paper, metals and glass. Therefore, the best decision will be made about which material to use. Because they are paying, they will be inclined to design their materials differently.

If local authorities are paying, they can't design things differently; they don't have the power to change the way things are made. If you shift the cost to manufacturers, they are more likely to choose a recyclable route, minimise materials and make a better material choice. In the consultation and the four models that have been proposed, that money is intended to flow directly back to local authorities or people who are doing the work for



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them. If that continues, goes through and is delivered as discussed, it will be very powerful. It will take the burden off local authorities and will make the whole system more efficient.

There is a second part, which is the tax on not using recycled content, which does go to HMRC. That will encourage manufacturers to use recycled content in the new things they make. That will make sure it goes all round in a loop and will help them make good decisions.

Q213 Chair: I have a slightly broader question to you as contractors. As we drill down on recycling in a different way, try to reduce plastics and recycle, it will alter contracts. Are you going to be able to have some flexibility? Otherwise, local authorities are going to be stuck in 10-year contracts. Are you going to come from the mindset that you will find it possible to vary that contract.

Richard Kirkman: In short, yes, we are going to come to the table and help. Contracts are generally not longer than seven years, which reflects the depreciation of the vehicle fleet that we have to buy at the beginning of the contract. Someone has to pay back the use of those vehicles. That said, we are always making amendments to our contracts for the realities of what goes on day to day, and we are working with our clients to see how we can do things differently. We expect these proposals to take seven to 10 years to be put into place. It is not an overnight fix, because it is a big cultural change for the country to collect recyclables differently. We think the two things—our coming to the table and being flexible, and the time it will take to deliver—will work in this context.

Q214 Angela Smith: How extensively do you feel that manufacturers talk to your industry at the moment? I have heard stories about barriers to recyclability such as tomato ketchup bottles that are not recyclable because of the little bit of gel around the top. How good do you think the relationship is at the moment? You clearly feel that manufacturers need to be incentivised even further to engage in thinking more carefully about packaging and the circular economy.

Richard Kirkman: I think it is becoming stronger and stronger every day. Since this has risen as a point of debate and consultations have hit the table, we are now having much more regular discussions. People are coming to our sorting sites, seeing their products miss the recycling bin and go into the non-recyclable bin, and saying, "How can I convert my material so that it ends up in the recycling bin?" They genuinely want that to happen for their brand value. There are lots of examples, such as milk bottles—the whole dairy industry has reduced the amount of dye in the blue, green and red tops, so it makes them a lot easier to recycle. Some of the big brands have changed black plastic so that it is detectable, and we have updated our machines. There is still a long way to go on that, but all these small things are happening. Added up, they will make a big difference.

Q215 Angela Smith: There's one gin bottle, I think, that is particularly difficult to recycle, is there not? Bombay gin.

Richard Kirkman: Because it's blue.

Angela Smith: I am being facetious.

Q216 **Chair:** I like Harveys Bristol Cream. It has a very blue bottle as well, doesn't it? Perhaps we could have blue glass collected. I suppose you are working together much more, and in a way it is necessary—because you physically pick out the rubbish that is recyclable—for you to work with people who are producing the bottles and supplying the processors and retailers. Is that working well, or can it be improved?

Richard Kirkman: The story is that over the last 20 years we have gone from no recycling to about 45% on average. It has been a huge cultural change for people. My mother never used to do it when she was a child, but now everyone does it. That was the big step and then we hit a plateau. Nothing happened for a few years, but it has all come up again. The new proposals are very exciting, because they hit all the right levels. In this supply chain of producers, consumers, local authorities, us and back to producers, everyone has got to do something a bit differently. Everyone has got to take a bit of pain and change what they do. If anyone in that circle does not do their bit, it does not work. At the moment, everybody is talking to each other.

Q217 **Chair:** Dan, do you want to add to that?

Dan Roberts: LARAC is very excited by extending producer responsibility and the opportunities it presents. We released a paper last year stating—and the National Audit Office quoted similarly—that local authorities and local authority taxpayers are effectively burdened with 90% of the cost of dealing with packaging waste that is put on the market, over which we have very limited control. The measures outlined in the consultation are very encouraging.

On the issue of net cost recovery, you touched on how the costs will effectively be calculated. It is important to recognise that, for local authorities, there are differences in service and they are very often driven by our circumstances—our demographics, housing stock, rurality and access to facilities. It is inconceivable that a rural Devon authority would have the same collection service as inner-city London. One of the aspects that EPR has to get right is that it is suitably nuanced, to drive the waste back up the waste hierarchy. It is one thing to say, "Yes, it is now harmonising polymers and making it easier to collect for recycling," but what is actually needs to do is incentivise producers in the right way to ban the polluting products—to heavily tax them to such an extent it makes sense to substitute them for better materials. Ultimately, it needs to fund the net cost recovery to the authority, taking into account the considerations of why councils put in the services that they do. There are reasons behind it, and many of the schemes put in are evidence-based.

EPR provides great opportunities. As Richard and Peter have touched on, it is about the alignment with the supply chain. Effectively, local authorities can provide consistent services if the material throughput is consistent and



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the end markets are consistent. But we cannot work miracles in the middle.

Q218 **Chair:** It is about getting it right and hitting the right levels so that you drive a reduction in the use of plastic, or use different types, meaning those that are more compostable or that use different materials. You don't just put a tax on it and drive up costs without driving innovation. I think we should be able to get that right, but Government doesn't always get it right, so we will have to work on that. Jacob, do you have anything to add?

Jacob Hayler: You are quite right: we need to be driving the right behaviours. There are lots of new initiatives coming through from the resources and waste strategy. We are talking about EPR, a plastics tax, consistency of collections arrangements and a deposit returns scheme for drinks containers. It is important to ensure that all these measures are complementary and working together and driving the right behaviours.

As Dan said, we are in the middle. We have no control over our supply chain or the inputs that come to us. We need producers to design stuff better for recycling, because we will not meet future recycling targets unless the waste stream is better designed for recyclability. We also need consumers to be putting the right thing in the right bin, so we need much clearer, consistent messaging and national labelling so that people know what to do and we take the confusion out of it. That is absolutely fundamental.

Then, as has been alluded to, there is no point collecting all this stuff if we have not got a market for it. We need to be creating end markets for it.

Chair: It's no good just ticking a box and saying, "Right, that's been recycled," when actually it hasn't been.

Jacob Hayler: We need those end markets and to encourage domestic end markets. That is what the plastics tax is designed to do, and that is what we really want to see.

In terms of the costs and the impacts on local authorities, I think packaging is only about 20% of the waste stream, so potentially it is only about 20% of the cost that could be covered. Other initiatives have been brought in where DEFRA has said in the strategy that it will cover the costs, including transition costs. We need to ensure that that happens on a transparent basis, because we will not be able to achieve all the ambitions in the strategy unless it is properly funded.

Q219 **Chair:** You are saying that you must actually get what is promised—is that right?

Jacob Hayler: Exactly.

Chair: Don't you always? No, I won't be facetious. I had better withdraw that question—you'll have too much to say about it.

Q220 **John Grogan:** I want to touch on a couple of things that have already



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been mentioned, to ensure that I've understood properly. In terms of creating end markets for plastic food and drink packaging, I take it the plastic tax is the main way of doing that. Are there also other ways?

Jacob Hayler: The EU is introducing a single-use plastics directive which includes, I think, 35% mandatory recycled content for PET bottles by 2030. So, you could do it by obligations and bring it in that way. I think that DEFRA and the UK Government's preferred approach is a tax. A plastics tax is a great start, but it is only a part of the waste stream. We need it across different materials and we need stronger incentives to help create domestic demand.

Q221 **John Grogan:** We have heard about flexibility in the contracts, which is good to hear. Isn't there a danger in some of these contracts being so long term? For example, Veolia has years to go on incinerator contracts. Are you really going to give those up? Isn't that a disincentive for recycling?

Richard Kirkman: Lots of companies do, and I think it is extremely fortunate that we do have that capacity in the UK; otherwise we would be landfilling millions of tonnes of material.

Q222 **John Grogan:** But isn't it a disincentive for recycling? For example, South Oxfordshire, which is often quoted, is a very good recycling council, but since it built an incinerator, recycling has gone down by 10%. It is still high—in the upper 50s—but it has gone down.

Richard Kirkman: I don't know those figures, but the evidence across Europe—and across the world in fact—is that countries that have more energy recovery incineration have higher recycle rates. They go hand in hand, and the evidence shows that it improves recycling rates.

Q223 **John Grogan:** Denmark has high levels of incineration and its slogan now is "Recycle more, incinerate less", but you are saying that there is no trade-off.

Richard Kirkman: Whose slogan?

Q224 **John Grogan:** The Danish Government's: "Recycle more, incinerate less". You don't see any—

Richard Kirkman: No. I don't think we're at that stage at all. What we are doing—

Q225 **John Grogan:** Should we be incinerating plastics at all?

Richard Kirkman: For avoiding landfill, we should be; for non-recyclable plastics, the much better use of them is to recover the energy, rather than landfill the material.

Q226 **John Grogan:** But is it not true that once we get rid of coal, incineration of most unrecycled waste will be the most CO₂-intensive form of generation? It is 25% efficient to generate heat from such a method, whereas new gas is 55%, so isn't it dirty coal? I am not asking you about at the moment; I am just—



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Richard Kirkman: While I accept your onslaught on incineration and your dislike of it, the facts show that it is an important part of the waste hierarchy—

Q227 **John Grogan:** But in terms of CO₂, am I right or am I wrong?

Richard Kirkman: You're wrong.

Q228 **John Grogan:** So, it is more—25% is wrong, is it?

Richard Kirkman: No, it is 50% carbon-neutral biomass that we are recovering—

John Grogan: But plastics—

Richard Kirkman: We're not incinerating plastics; we are incinerating mixed non-recyclable waste.

Q229 **John Grogan:** But there is plastic in it, isn't there? Should we be incinerating plastics at all?

Richard Kirkman: Not if we can recycle them. But if we—

John Grogan: Not if we can recycle them. Thank you, Chair.

Chair: I think one or two others want to speak.

Jacob Hayler: John, we have spoken about this before. Energy from waste is an alternative to landfill for non-recyclable material. Every time—

Q230 **John Grogan:** Why, then, when South Oxfordshire built an incinerator, did the recycling go down—

Jacob Hayler: I don't know about that particular example—

John Grogan: But you have been quoting it at me.

Jacob Hayler: Oxfordshire as a county has very high recycling rates, married with an energy-from-waste solution, so—

Q231 **John Grogan:** But isn't it right that once South Oxfordshire built an incinerator, the recycling rates went down?

Jacob Hayler: I don't know. You would have to—

John Grogan: But you have been quoting—

Chair: John, you are getting worse than me. Let them answer the questions.

John Grogan: I am inspired by you, Chair.

Chair: Let him answer.

Jacob Hayler: When it comes to CO₂ emissions, for every tonne that we divert from landfill to energy from waste, we save somewhere between 200 kg and 300 kg of CO₂, so it is a good solution from a CO₂ perspective.



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Now, there may be plastic in the mixed non-recyclable fraction that goes to energy from waste—

Q232 **John Grogan:** Should we be incinerating plastic?

Jacob Hayler: The alternative to that would be for it to go as mixed waste into landfill, which would be worse from a CO₂ perspective. That's the point.

Q233 **John Grogan:** Not for plastics it wouldn't be.

Jacob Hayler: But you cannot get the plastics out of the mixed waste—that's the problem. It would be more CO₂ and resource-intensive to extract that plastic from that residual waste. That is why we send it for energy recovery—because it does better in carbon terms.

Q234 **Chair:** That is 30-all, not 30-love. Anyone else what to join the fray? No? You're all chicken!

Cllr Fleming: All I would say is that the public have started to focus on landfill, as a thing, even more than recycling. Television and others have pushed the landfill issue. In my local authority area, I now know verbatim my landfill percentage. That is the figure that I keep in my mind—less than 2% of waste goes to landfill—and the public, whom we are trying to get involved in this, like that. They like the fact that we have a very tiny percentage of waste, which is actually what is left at the end of the process of burning it—

Q235 **John Grogan:** But aren't you worried about the fact that burning it is CO₂-intensive?

Cllr Fleming: But we collect plastic, so the amount of plastic going in that residual is tiny. It is a tiny fraction.

Q236 **John Grogan:** But the incineration of waste generally is CO₂-intensive.

Cllr Fleming: But it is better than putting it in the ground.

Q237 **John Grogan:** In terms of producing energy, you would be better doing gas, in terms of CO₂-intensiveness.

Jacob Hayler: But if you are using the gas for energy generation, where would you put the waste?

John Grogan: I thought it was 30-all and we had finished. Thank you, Chair.

Q238 **Chair:** Dan wants to add one last thing, then we will move on. John has put his case very strongly here this morning.

Dan Roberts: Going back to the original point on contracts, there are challenges, but perhaps not insurmountable ones. Richard spoke of collection contracts, which tend to be for seven or eight years, along with the lifespan of a collection vehicle. The reprocessing and disposal contracts, which rely on feedstock, can be longer term. It is important to recognise that, within the consultations, DEFRA talks about funding new



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net burdens, which comes back to my point about why councils provide the services that they do. There have been some excellent examples in the last 10 years, highlighted by the Treasury and local partnerships, of joint working between councils and the private sector, where efficiencies have been driven into the collection and reprocessing of this material, taking a long-term view.

If anything comes forward that could fundamentally alter the way we collect, what we collect, how much we collect and where it goes, the impact on each council needs to be understood individually; it cannot be a generic, centralised formula that states, "Councils will receive x because the cost is x." That does not recognise the differences between councils that are, frankly, outside councils' control. One of the key issues is composition, and a deposit return scheme—

Chair: I think we will come on to that in a minute.

Dan Roberts: I merely make the point that, if that were to come in, the extent to which it was successful and the nature of the material harvested would impact on the efficiency of collection and reprocessing. The local authority will bear the burden of going to the market for that material—bear in mind that we have a statutory duty to collect recyclable material—yet as Peter so eloquently put it, the market is such that we have to bear the risk. When the market turns, we do not have the choice to hedge that risk.

Q239 **David Simpson:** What we find in Northern Ireland, with the 11 councils, is that we cannot get consistency. Every council has different targets. It is a cultural change, and it is very difficult to get people into that mindset. However, Wales seems to have managed it through consistency and imposing statutory recycling targets. Should England do the same? Dan, all the fingers are pointing at you.

Dan Roberts: Absolutely.

Cllr Fleming: Dan has all the Welsh figures.

Dan Roberts: Briefly following on from the last point on deposit return schemes, one of LARAC's concerns is that statutory targets could be set for a service that was immediately impacted by changes outside its control. For example, my authority, South Staffordshire, ran a lot of modelling on deposit return schemes. A deposit return scheme will remove 29% of our kerbside yield by weight, yet will reduce our residual waste arisings by just 2%. In effect, it would displace material that is already collected into a deposit return scheme. The argument could be that, if it enhances recycling slightly, that is a good thing. The difficulty is that, if we are set a statutory recycling target on that basis, factors then coming in outside our control will really impinge on our ability to meet them. In our case, it would drop recycling by 7%.

In the case of Wales, on consistency, it is often pointed out that Wales has the third highest recycling rate in the world, and Welsh authorities are to be commended for that. I think there are issues at play other than the



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consistency of material. Only 11 of the 22 councils in Wales actually collect the core materials in accordance with the Welsh blueprint. Some 100% of councils collect food waste separately, which DEFRA is seeking to expand across the United Kingdom. It must also be pointed out that the recycling performance is calculated to include recycled material from incinerator bottom ash, which adds about 5.5 to 6 percentage points to the figures. If that was done in England, Scotland and across the UK, that would put our recycling performance to 50%.

I am not seeking to denigrate what they have done in Wales, but it is largely being driven by food waste. A number of councils have moved to a three or four-weekly residual collection, because they have put the food and recycling services in place and are running out of options to compel residents to recycle. Local authority powers to compel residents to actually follow the service are somewhat limited, to such an extent that Swansea Council recently moved down a compulsory recycling route. The Welsh model is often held up as the way to go, but it must also be pointed out that the net cost of service in Wales has doubled in 13 years. The Welsh Government fund the services to the tune of £60 million to £70 million a year.

Q240 Chair: You are talking about 2.5 million or 3 million people, and many fewer local authorities, compared with 50 million people or more in England. Does that make a real difference in Wales?

Dan Roberts: I don't believe it necessarily does, Chair. The reason is that when WRAP looked at this as part of the consistency agenda, they put a lot of money into this in 2017 and ran pilots in 48 local authorities. They looked at authorities in clusters, and effectively created a virtual unitary, so they removed district and county council and unitary boundaries to create a unitary. What they found in the circumstances was that, to achieve the higher rates, particularly with separate food waste, 80% of authorities already collecting residual waste fortnightly would see an increase in their service cost. They noted that there are always economies of scale at some point, but I would point to the number of authorities in Wales having to move to three or four-weekly to gain those extra few points, to nudge residents to effectively use the service correctly.

In the consultation on consistency, DEFRA alludes to a cap where no authority can collect residual waste less frequently than fortnightly. We believe it is for authorities to make that call; many authorities in England, moving to three-weekly with a comprehensive recycling service, have seen recycling rates boosted. I do not necessarily believe that a centrally issued service standard, which could be contrary to innovation, is necessarily the right way to do it.

Chair: David, you come back once and then I will let Sheryll keep going.

Q241 David Simpson: Very quickly, you mentioned that the statutory targets may not be the right direction to go because there could be outside factors. What could the outside factors possibly be? I think Richard mentioned that a recycling contract with a council was seven years. I am



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sure there is flexibility, but they are there for changes that happen over a period of seven years. Could that apply to statutory targets?

Dan Roberts: Sure. We talk about consistency, and often there is excessive focus on consistency of collection: 99% of councils in England collect paper, card, cans and plastic bottles; 88% collect glass; and 80% collect pots, tubs and trays. When we talk about external factors, the two main ones are that in Wales, with the 64% target, where councils have moved to three or four-weekly residual collections, it is because they have put every single possible service in place. The food is separate, all the materials are collected separately and garden waste is collected separately free of charge.

There are four councils in Wales that would comply with the blueprint and the free-of-charge garden waste. The only way they can eke out the extra percentage points is to move to a three or four-weekly collection. It is the squeeze effect, if you do not have the capacity. Again, if DEFRA mandates a service standard that states, "You must collect residual waste no less frequently than every two weeks," a lot of authorities in Wales will not hit their target, and likewise if deposit return schemes cannibalise the material that Welsh authorities are legally bound to collect. As for putting a contractor in post, if I were to contract with anybody—

Q242 **Chair:** I will cut you off there, because I want to bring Peter in to explain why it is so difficult for English authorities.

Cllr Fleming: This is something that I got particularly cross about at the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee inquiry looking at the DEFRA proposals. Frankly, with a proposal that puts forward eight identical bins in identical colours and sizes for every property in this country, to be collected in an identical way, the only confusion comes from people who live in more than one place. I know what I can recycle. Dan knows what he can recycle. We all know what we can recycle. It is only people who live in more than one place who get confused about what they can recycle, and that is a fairly small number of people.

Q243 **Chair:** So people should not live in more than one place, then? It is compulsory for them to live just in one place?

Cllr Fleming: It is a fairly niche group of people, Chairman.

Q244 **Chair:** There could be all sorts of people who move around. Go on—you will get yourself into trouble for that.

Cllr Fleming: We can have a national refuse and recycling scheme, dictated at the centre, and frankly local government will just say, "Over to you. You are now in charge of collection and recycling in this country."

Q245 **Mrs Murray:** Peter, I have seen the recycling system in Wales. As you have said, it involves about eight or nine different coloured bins that are collected. You have to wheel some of those bins out for collection on a certain day, on a trolley. That is really good, but how can you roll that sort of system out to somebody who lives in a flat? You have said it has to be consistent across all local authorities. That system would not work



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in multi-occupancy buildings.

Cllr Fleming: With respect, Chairman, it is DEFRA that says that that system should be rolled out, and local government says it shouldn't. I will give you an example in London—

Q246 **Mrs Murray:** So how would you overcome it? How does the Local Government Association think we are going to increase recycling rates across the piece? How would you overcome that?

Cllr Fleming: I would go to local solutions. This is why we have local government—to make local choices. If you take London, for example, a few years ago we started to move to alternate weekly. Those of you with long memories will remember in the past your waste got collected every week. All your waste got collected every week. There was a big debate about alternate weekly collection. The leader of Westminster City Council at the time, after listening to the debate for 20 minutes, pushed his chair back and said very quietly, "In Westminster we collect every day," because, actually, you have to collect every day. There is no place, in mansion blocks, to keep the waste for two, three or four weeks. Frankly, the Government need to listen to local government—listen to the way that we put contracts together, and give us the tools to allow us to do it but to make local decisions.

Q247 **Chair:** I'm halfway between you and the Government on this one, because I think, yes, Government have got to listen to you; but I think you have also got to listen to Government. I don't think you can just go on with the fact that you have got these contracts, you have got your certain type of waste collection, and you are going to stick to it come hell or high water. I think what we have got to be certain of is that you are being flexible. I accept you don't want to be told you have got to have a particular system, because, as I said, I came through local government, like Sheryll—many of us in this room did. On the other hand, the Government have got to have a role in this. So are you listening, or are you just telling us, "Mind your own damn business. We have got our own local authorities and we will do what we like"? It sounds a bit like that, Peter, if I may say so.

Cllr Fleming: Chairman, we have the most centralised form of local government in the whole of western Europe already. The reality is that the Government have set targets. Local government has set out to achieve those targets. There has been huge innovation across the sector using our partners in industry as well. I think when targets are set with flexibility of approach, actually we get the best of both worlds, but—I will continue to come back to the point—we have no control about what comes into the waste stream and we have no control over the market at the other end. The bit that Government can actually do something about is the bit at the beginning, which is stopping stuff entering the waste stream in the first place. That is where they can legislate, and that is where they can make the difference.

Q248 **Chair:** I get that, and we take that on board, but the key issue for this particular inquiry is consistency in what plastics are collected, so it is



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clear for consumers. This is where the big problem is.

Cllr Fleming: I am terribly sorry, Chairman. I think what you need consistency on is what is entering the waste stream. It is not about consistency of—

Q249 **Chair:** Isn't it your job when you are collecting that, as councils, to make it clear—

Cllr Fleming: There are seven types of plastic, Chairman.

Q250 **Chair:** It is no good you just saying that none of us should move around the country, and we should all live in one place, and we shouldn't move—you are not going to get away with that one. Like I said, you have got to have a system that is more recognisable. The system that we have up here with our flat, by Battersea power station, is totally different to what we have got where we farm in Somerset—completely different. I accept that it needs to be different—well, not that it needs to be different, but that it can be different, provided it is reasonably clear to those who are moving around what the system is in your particular area. I am not sure that is done, because I think it is done if people understand what the system is. That is rather what you said, Peter, to be fair. I am probably not quite paraphrasing you, I accept, but you have got to be careful. Naturally, we all come from a background where we are doing this day in, day out, and we understand what we are doing; but do the general public understand it?

Cllr Fleming: Yes, because most of the general public, Chairman, only live in one place. They have one system to remember.

Q251 **Chair:** You have made that point. Probably 50% of the population recycle reasonably well, and you then have another 25% of the population who are largely apathetic towards it and 25% who do not give a damn. How do we get to those who are less inclined? Some people are obsessed by recycling—my wife is—but there is a mixture of people in this world. How do you make sure that you get to and inform those who are not quite so keen?

Dan Roberts: If I may, the core materials are key. DEFRA has alluded to this focus on the material. The broad view from LARAC is certainly that we should focus on the core materials. There is a concern that local authorities offer some wildly different services, but 99% of councils collect four of the core materials already. I do not think it is inconceivable that someone living in inner-city London, compared with a rural part of the country, could live with a different container.

We should be focusing on outputs. If the collection system is well communicated and produces material that is going to an end destination and has a purpose, local authorities should be free to determine, to an extent, among that banner of core materials.

As a rural authority, I have 110,000 suppliers, with each producing a disparate and evolving waste stream. We have to put a service in across a very rural district that captures the maximum yield from that material. As



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has been stated, I do not have control over that, and I must deal with markets where, for example, the value of LDPE—low-density polyethylene—halved in 18 months. That has to be absorbed, and that falls on the local authority. Again, on core materials, yes, we are already nearly there, but we should let the local authority communicate the solution, the colour of the container and when it is done to the residents, to achieve that high performance.

Q252 Chair: I do understand. The value of the material for recycling goes up and down dramatically, which can add huge costs, or vice versa. I accept that. Jacob will come in, and that will lead neatly into Angela's question.

Jacob Hayler: Like you, Chairman, I have some sympathy with both sides. However, there are two aspects when it comes to collections: what you collect, which should be imposed from the centre, and how you collect it, on which councils need a certain degree of flexibility. They do not need 300 different system; they need about three. WRAP has designed a consistency framework with three different solutions, which should pretty much cover it off and make it straightforward.

Chair: They seem to prefer their 300, rather than the three.

Jacob Hayler: When it comes to consumer confusion, local authority funding across the board has been stretched so much that they do not have any money to communicate to householders anymore. If you really want to make a difference like in Wales, it all comes down to funding. In Wales, the last time I looked, funding for waste services was about 20% more per head than in England. If you gave English councils another £600 million, roughly, I think they could do a lot with it.

Chair: We will have to talk to the next Chancellor, in that case; I will send you in to speak to him or her. Angela, that leads neatly on to your question.

Q253 Angela Smith: It does come neatly into this. I think there is sometimes a confusion between the colours of the bins and how many bins local authorities have in each area and consumer awareness of what can go in the recycling bins. For my own authority, Sheffield, I have to be absolutely honest that I am not really clear about what goes in the plastics and glass bin, frankly, which leads to questions about labelling and consumer awareness of what can actually go in the bins. Does inconsistency in recycling collections make it difficult for packaging producers to provide clear recycling information for consumers? I think it is a really complex area for the average householder.

Richard Kirkman: It is a complex area, but the evidence clearly shows that people generally know what their bins are for. Most people do. That is not where the confusion comes from. The confusion comes from when you have a thing in your hand and you do not know what that thing is, so you therefore do not know which bin to match it up with.

Q254 Angela Smith: What about the tray from a ready meal, for instance?

Richard Kirkman: Made of what?



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Angela Smith: Black plastic. Does that go in a recycling bin or not?

Richard Kirkman: You read the leaflet, or the label on the bin, which will tell you if it should or not.

Q255 **Angela Smith:** Is the labelling clear enough? There was a time when Sheffield was telling its residents not to put those in the bin.

Chair: Could I just ask the witness to look forward when you speak, so that the microphones pick you up?

Richard Kirkman: There you go; you have the answer. They are telling residents not to put them in.

Q256 **Angela Smith:** Do you think that there needs to be some clear— This is where national consistency is important.

Richard Kirkman: The answer to your question is yes, and that all items should have clear labelling designating which bin it goes in. I absolutely agree with that.

Angela Smith: That's my point.

Cllr Fleming: You are spot on, Angela. It is not about the consistency of collection, but about the consistency of the message. In part, the message is driven by the market. The reason why councils might have to change what they can collect is about whether there is anywhere for it go at the other end. I know my own authority has changed its advice to residents over a number of years, as markets have come and gone. If we put something into the recyclates that no longer has a market, it goes off to the recycling. They see that as a contaminated load. You are spot on. We need consistent labelling that says, "This is a plastic that can be recycled" or "This is a plastic that cannot be recycled". That will drive the consumer to ask, "Why have I got plastic that can't be recycled? Why is this person using it? Why is this manufacturer making it?"

Q257 **Angela Smith:** Do you feel, Peter, that the responsibility for ensuring that such messaging is conveyed consistently and regularly to consumers belongs with Government?

Cllr Fleming: The issue is that until we get consistency in what is entering the waste stream, we will not get consistency in what can and cannot be recycled. Of course, there will be innovations. Richard, I think you mentioned that there has been a move on black plastic. A year ago, I was on television slamming manufacturers about black plastic on behalf of the LGA. There has been a move by some manufacturers of black plastic to change it slightly so that it can now be picked up.

Richard Kirkman: By the time we have solved it, everyone will have learnt not to put it in the recycling bin.

Cllr Fleming: That's the problem. We then have to say that black plastic is okay.



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Dan Roberts: LARAC supports a mandatory labelling system on packaging. It was interesting that the retailers were here two weeks ago, and there is still a proportion of packaging coming through the chain that is not labelled appropriately. We would certainly support a binary “recyclable/not recyclable,” and this is where producer responsibility is key, because of exactly the point that has been made. If people are continually putting packaging that is not recyclable on the market, the modulated fee aspect of producer responsibility needs to challenge that. The labelling that goes on an item is only a result of the product itself. It is not the case that local authorities can suddenly magic that it is recyclable. It comes back to pushing waste back up that hierarchy and to the top. We would certainly prefer it, because there is confusion at the kerbside with plastics. To give an example, a number of councils have to deal with used nappies that are continually put in the recycling bin. No authority collects nappies as part of a dry kerbside recycling service. When you look into it, you see there is a recyclable logo on the packaging, which often means the packaging is made from recycled plastic. That causes the confusion. Your question was on who sets the agenda. Government should clearly set the agenda through extended producer responsibility and mandate on pack labelling. When a resident is standing there confused and saying, “Is it recyclable or not?”, that is what they need to know.

Q258 **Angela Smith:** And it really needs to be binary in your view. We have the Green Dot system, which actually causes more confusion—it hinders more than it helps. Is that your view? That is a leading question, I admit.

Dan Roberts: Equally, check locally. Every local authority would absolutely love to collect in full all the materials that come our way. It would be great if, rather than check locally, there was a binary system of yes/no. The confusion would be removed. Otherwise, we get into the situation of box ticking, to which the Chair referred—we collect items because it seems the right thing to do, without any end market.

Q259 **Angela Smith:** Just to go back to the earlier question, which I do not think I put very effectively, do you think that if we had such a system in place, the Government could do a lot more to ensure that consumers understand that binary messaging and abide by it? In other words, should it be down to local authorities to keep telling people how a binary labelling system works? Should it be Government that does that, or both?

Cllr Fleming: At the moment, we are in a really strange place, because there is a state of flux. You would find a message going out on Tuesday to say something is not recyclable. I remember that we as a local authority were doing very well with all different types of glass a number of years ago. Suddenly, the bottom fell out of the brown glass market. I was told, “Now this is costing you to have it collected.” Black plastic is an example. We have demonised black plastic. Most people understand that black plastic is bad for recycling. If we move to a point where black plastic suddenly becomes recyclable, changing the public’s view of black plastic might be quite difficult.

Q260 **Angela Smith:** That is where the binary labelling system comes in, does



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it not? If it is black plastic and it is not recyclable at one point, you have the label on it that says, "Do not recycle." If it becomes recyclable and the market is there for it, you change the label. Surely that is the way of dealing with that.

Richard Kirkman: We are working with OPRL—the on-pack recycling labelling system—and with the plastics pact and manufacturers. It is their role to come up with a scheme that works. The Government are mandating that, but it is up to the manufacturers to make sure that the labelling system works and they buy into that, so they label all their products.

Angela Smith: And prominently, I would assume.

Richard Kirkman: Don't underestimate the challenge. Labelling items is very difficult. There are already a lot of ingredients and health warnings—there is lots of information there. It will be some indicative signal that we will have to learn to do, I think.

Q261 **Angela Smith:** That's when blockchain technology in the long term has some use, but possibly recycling is one of the more important aspects of a label.

Cllr Fleming: But then we only have to look at the varied views on nutritional labelling. You need something that is absolutely consistent.

Angela Smith: I take your point.

Chair: Let's keep going as we have the Minister coming. An interesting point that Dan made is that the label on the wrapping is different from what is inside—one may be recyclable and the other may not be. I think it is a fascinating point. As we drill down into detailed recycling it is something we will have to deal with.

Q262 **Mrs Murray:** Dan, you have already touched on this, so I will focus my question initially on the other witnesses. To what extent is a deposit return scheme a threat to kerbside recycling systems? Are you concerned about the Secretary of State's announcement yesterday in his speech that he apparently supports an all-in model rather than the on-the-go model? Could I have your views on that? Perhaps let's start with you, Jacob.

Jacob Hayler: As I said, there are lots of initiatives coming out of the resources and waste strategy. We think it is really important that they all work together and are complementary, so if the Government choose to go down an all-in route on the DRS, it is important that they make sure that that works with an extended producer responsibility system and with the other elements around consistency, and that they look at the impact on kerbside.

From our perspective, we will not meet the future recycling targets unless the nature and composition of the waste stream is made more recyclable. We need strong incentives on producers and manufacturers to make the waste stream more recyclable. You can do that through an extended



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producer responsibility system, with modulated fees putting the right incentives on manufacturers to design things in the right way. We would like to see as much material as possible going through an EPR system, and we would like to see deposit returns used to capture anything that is not being recycled elsewhere. That could include other elements such as coffee cups, which are not widely collected at the kerbside. It could include domestic batteries, which are an absolute nightmare if they come out of local authority collections.

We would like to see great focus on EPR; the Secretary of State did have a good focus on EPR in his speech yesterday. We commend that position and we would like as much as possible through EPR, and a role for DRS stuff that is not widely collected.

Q263 **Chair:** Please don't use too many abbreviations, just for the record.

Jacob Hayler: EPR is extended producer responsibility. DRS is deposit return scheme.

Chair: It's just it doesn't read well in the end.

Q264 **Mrs Murray:** Do you have anything to add to that, Richard?

Chair: I am sure Peter has.

Richard Kirkman: I endorse what Jacob said; also, we need things to start happening. I welcome announcements that say we are starting to do things and we are going to go through with the strategy that has been outlined. We need all four elements: the extended producer responsibility shifts the costs from the local authorities to the manufacturers. If that happens, the risks of taking materials out of kerbside recycling through a deposit return scheme go down, because they are not paying for it anyway. We need everything to be hand in hand. We recover 60% of plastic bottles in this country; where they have deposit return schemes, they recover 98%. Something has to change, but we need to do things hand in hand with one another.

Mrs Murray: Peter?

Cllr Fleming: We are supportive of a deposit return scheme in general, but it is entirely untested in this country.

Q265 **Mrs Murray:** Do you have a preference for an on-the-go system as opposed to an all-in system?

Cllr Fleming: We don't have a particular preference for either system. Some councils would be more supportive of an on-the-go system. When you drill down into the figures, you see that in their home situation—you are able to recycle plastic bottles in 99% of council areas—most people recycle plastic bottles. It is when people are out and about that the issues arise. We should not beat ourselves up as a country. Thinking about some of the countries we think are naturally brilliant at recycling, Germany, for example, does not have kerbside recycling for most things. If you go to Berlin, you will see people carrying around huge Chinese laundry bags full



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of plastics they have picked up from around litter bins because there is a deposit return scheme and you can make a decent living from doing that.

Mrs Murray: A bit like I used to on the beach when I was a child.

Q266 **Chair:** The only thing is you may have countered your own argument.

Cllr Fleming: That wouldn't be unusual, Chair.

Q267 **Chair:** Would it be a bonus to have people going around collecting things?

Cllr Fleming: Maybe, but if they are going around ripping open recycling bags to get the thing that has a value, spilling the rest of the recyclates around the street, probably not.

Chair: No. That is also a good point.

Q268 **Mrs Murray:** Just for clarification, do you think an all-in deposit return scheme would be a threat to kerbside recycling?

Cllr Fleming: It is not a threat. The fact is that if people were taking part in a deposit return scheme instead of putting things out to be recycled, there would be two ways of looking at that. In terms of the threat, it is a cost to local authorities anyway, so the less stuff there is in the waste stream, the better the bit we have to collect is. However, as was said, 99% of councils pick up plastics for recycling, so the plastic bottles that are not recycled tend to be the ones outside the household waste stream.

Dan Roberts: If I may, in the consultation the Government put forward two key aims for a deposit return scheme: to reduce litter arisings and to improve material capture. One of the concerns that LARAC has is that a deposit return scheme may be contrary to producer responsibility, inasmuch as producer responsibility is aimed at—I come back to the waste hierarchy—preventing waste in the first instance. The fear we have is that a deposit return scheme is effectively going to require a continual supply of material to satisfy the vast supply chain that is going to coalesce around this service. The Institute of Economic Affairs quoted a £1 billion set-up cost and £800 million a year to run for £37 million worth of material.

Mrs Murray: That's straying from my question, really.

Dan Roberts: Pardon me, Chair. To come back to the concern about—

Chair: Could we have short answers? I have to bring Alan in to ask his question and the Minister is outside.

Dan Roberts: Ultimately, examples are given of the success of deposit return schemes abroad, but the UK has a mature kerbside recycling infrastructure, which many countries on the continent did not have. They went down the deposit return route, whereas this country went down the kerbside collection route. It comes back to the alignment across these consultations. If a local authority is going to be required mandatorily to collect plastic bottles, glass bottles and cans, yet a deposit return scheme is competing for that exact material, as a local authority designing my service for collection and contracting out the service, am I requesting a

contractor to collect and potentially reprocess material that technically should not be there?

Mrs Murray: I think you have already explained that to us, but thank you very much.

Chair: It's a very good message, and I think we've got it; don't worry. Thank you very much for that.

Q269 **Alan Brown:** I want to ask about a switch to compostable packaging and the viability of compostable packaging. Does the lack of collection infrastructure, including food waste collections—I think only 51% of local authorities in England collect food waste—hinder the viability of compostable packaging?

Richard Kirkman: There's a lot of issues with compostable packaging. Some of it is not compostable; some of it is only partially biodegradable and ends up putting microplastics into the compost. We need real standards to establish what is a truly compostable material and what isn't. Then it needs to be consistently labelled. A lot of people would not know that this cup is made of PLA and compostable and that it's not just a fossil plastic. It's very difficult to tell by looking at it unless you have a microscope trained on the bottom.

Chair: Yes, I made quite a case one day on those particular beakers. I think they are—

Richard Kirkman: They are PLA—

Q270 **Chair:** I think you have to get them up to 60° and compost the material with other organic waste, but I don't think people necessarily realise that; that's the trouble.

Richard Kirkman: No, and if this item goes to an anaerobic digestion plant, it will likely be screened off at the beginning, because we have to remove solid objects like that so we can pump the material through the pipes. There are all these issues. It doesn't really fit the existing infrastructure, so we just need to be a bit cautious about the development of biodegradable plastic use, I think.

Q271 **Alan Brown:** So is that mostly a manufacturer responsibility? You have touched on regulation. Who is going to have to take the lead?

Richard Kirkman: I would suggest—this is proposed in the waste and resources strategy—that standards are set for what is truly biodegradable and under what conditions. Then you can label materials as passing that standard, and then we can manage them. At the moment, if you introduce new items, it just makes the system more complicated, not better.

Q272 **Chair:** Sorry for interrupting you, Alan. Is there potential for these compostable plastics then to contaminate other plastics that are recyclable?



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Richard Kirkman: If they were put into the plastics waste stream, they would contaminate the plastics, yes, in the same way as if plastics were put into the composting waste stream. So the labelling is critical.

Q273 **Chair:** I suppose, if they are genuinely compostable and you have a separate food waste system, they could go into that.

Richard Kirkman: Yes, we need a wider look at this. Why are we switching to compostable plastic? Is that because it's better? If you go to the café just out the front, you can buy a tin of water. Obviously, the carbon emissions from that tin of water are about four times as bad as those for the plastic bottle you could have had, which was just as recyclable, so it's a much worse environmental solution. We need to look in the round at whether these things are better. That's just a word of caution on switching.

Q274 **Chair:** Who wants to add to that?

Cllr Fleming: This glass bottle is your best option. It can be taken away, washed and reused.

Angela Smith: Or just drink tap water.

Cllr Fleming: With your hands!

Chair: And have fountains in the streets.

Q275 **Alan Brown:** You're saying that that is the best option, but clearly it's for a particular product, which is water. Obviously, there is a desire for compostable packaging. I take the point about it being introduced too early, when the infrastructure is not there, but surely compostable packaging is the future direction; it's where we want to get to.

Dan Roberts: The point has been raised by Richard about the energy. I suppose the question is: what is the purpose of the compostable packaging? Let's say a product is put into circulation and has been designed in such a way that it can be captured for recycling and put back into use again and again and again. In terms of these cups going through the composting process, and the amount of embedded energy in that that could then be lost once the material is composted and released to ground, we have to take a more holistic view of this. People say compostable is better than normal plastic. Well, if, for that normal plastic, the polymer has been rationalised and there's a comprehensive collection service in place, be it at the kerbside or through a DRS, and that gets used nine or 10 times, the energy value is more beneficial. These are the kinds of thing we need to look at. A number of anaerobic digestion plants that treat the food waste can't handle this cup and will seek to segregate it at the front end and have to de-package, which again adds costs. I'm quite concerned that we are almost adding more problems and adding more materials in, when we have not rationalised to the extent we should have done.

Q276 **Chair:** Yes, because these cups have got to be composted. They won't actually go through an anaerobic plant, will they? They have to be put into a system where you turn the waste and have an organic sort of



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system.

Richard Kirkman: They need 18 to 20 weeks to break down into truly organic matter that we can reuse. Using plants to make plastic, rather than using oil, has its own problems. At the moment, we don't use a lot of biodegradable, biosourced plastic. If we were to grow this significantly and change all the packaging, we would have to use arable land to make packaging, and the amount of land we would be using would be problematic. We don't have enough food in the world, so that would not necessarily be a good solution.

Alan Brown: That is the biofuel argument.

Chair: That is an interesting point that you have made to the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee, which also deals with agriculture. Thank you for that one.

Q277 **Alan Brown:** On food waste, only 51% of local authorities in England collect food waste separately. Is that an issue, and what can be done to drive up the separate collection of food waste?

Jacob Hayler: There is no way that we will meet future recycling targets unless we are collecting food waste separately everywhere. DEFRA has recognised that and is proposing in the strategy to make it mandatory everywhere, which is great as long as it is paid for.

Richard Kirkman: Of course, it massively improves the quality of the dry recyclables when you have food waste collection, because people do not accidentally put the food in, as they are a bit more focused on putting it in the food bin.

Q278 **Chair:** Thank you. For the final question, could I have very short answers, please, because the Minister is waiting? Should there be restrictions on sending plastic waste exports to countries with poor records of effective waste management? Really, that is just exporting our problem, and it is not a solution, is it? Very quickly, what are your views?

Jacob Hayler: I think that the problem arises when plastic is exported for further sorting. You can have single polymer plastics exported, where they are reprocessed and recycled back into other stuff, but as soon as you have another sorting stage somewhere with potentially weak controls, there is potentially a problem. That is what we would like to see less of.

Q279 **Chair:** Yes, because there are stories where waste has just gone into landfill. It has been exported abroad—

Jacob Hayler: I think that we need the context, which is that the vast majority of exports happen in a very professional and controlled way and result in recycling. We do not have sufficient domestic capacity to recycle that stuff, so it would end up in landfill here.

Q280 **Chair:** Your argument is that as long as it is properly audited to make sure that it actually gets properly recycled, it should be allowed to carry on, by ship or whatever.



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Jacob Hayler: Then it is a good thing, yes.

Richard Kirkman: It needs to be enforced. Currently, you are not allowed to export plastics to be landfilled. You are not supposed to export them to be sorted. We should not be exporting waste; we should export things that have value.

Cllr Fleming: Councils have already seen the impact of the China ban. We are also seeing that contractors are less willing to take on the risks, which will have an impact on contracts. You are absolutely right—we should not be exporting waste; we should be exporting resources. As long as it is going somewhere that it can be used as a resource, I think that is a solution.

Chair: And we can be absolutely certain that it has been used for that process. Dan, very quickly.

Dan Roberts: Sixty per cent. of plastics are exported from the UK because we do not have capacity in this country. An EPR—producer responsibility—offers an excellent opportunity for the Government to set the agenda to incentivise domestic reprocessing, aligned with the plastics tax, to pull that material through.

Q281 **Chair:** Then it generates an industry in itself, as well.

Dan Roberts: Absolutely, and it is a result that councils have quadrupled recycling rates in 15 years. This material needs a home. To echo what everybody else has stated, in the export market—where the material is a product—there are countries and companies buying it as a product. The vast majority of it is going back into products. Where that is for illegal activities, that needs quite rightly to be clamped down on because it undermines what we are trying to do.

Chair: Thank you, gentlemen. It has been a very lively session with very good evidence. We will dismiss you now and grill the Minister. Thank you very much for a very good session.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Dr Thérèse Coffey and Chris Preston.

Q282 **Chair:** Sorry to keep you waiting. We very much appreciate your coming this morning. Just for the record, Thérèse, please introduce yourself, although we know who you are, and then you can introduce yourself, Chris.

Dr Coffey: I am Thérèse Coffey, Member of Parliament for Suffolk Coastal and Environment Minister. It is my third birthday in post. It's an anniversary.



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Chair: Congratulations on the third birthday. Chris, please.

Chris Preston: I am Chris Preston, deputy director for resource and waste in DEFRA.

Q283 **Chair:** Thank you. We will get straight into it. First question, Minister: what is the Government's estimate of how much plastic food and drink packaging is produced in the UK? Do we have those figures?

Dr Coffey: The current rate of plastic packaging recycling is 46% in England, which is more than double the EU target.

Q284 **Chair:** But do we have an idea of how much we produce and use in a year? We must have, or we would not know about the 46%.

Dr Coffey: We think that just over 1 million tonnes are recycled in one way or another.

Q285 **Chair:** Right, so we would be just over 2 million tonnes. That 1 million tonnes amounts to 46%, does it? So we are at nearly two and a half in total. Is that right?

Dr Coffey: Yes. The packaging placed on the market in 2017 was just under 2.4 million tonnes.

Q286 **Chair:** My mental arithmetic is not too bad this morning. We have got that, and it is good that we are recycling nearly half, but we need to do a lot better.

Dr Coffey: I agree, but we are at more than double the EU target, and we want to keep trying to increase even more. It will vary according to what kind of plastic it is, but, as you know, we are very keen to increase our recycling rates, particularly on consumer packaging, and we hope that some of the proposals on which we have recently consulted will help us achieve that.

Q287 **Chair:** We are told the data is undermined because of the de minimis threshold on when companies must report how much waste they produce, because a lot of smaller companies do not have to declare, do they? So will you lower or scrap that threshold?

Dr Coffey: I don't think we will scrap the threshold. At the moment, people collect all the data formally on the basis of tonnage for regulatory burden purposes, because they are small businesses. We do a survey that gives us a sense of what is there. I do not anticipate the Government trying to increase the regulatory burden on small businesses to get this.

Q288 **Chair:** I understand that, and I have sympathy with that, but if you add up the amount of plastic that goes through those small businesses, it amounts to a great deal. So is the solution to try and target the plastic that is produced in the first place, rather than target the smaller companies? I have sympathy with your position, but if you add it all together, it is an awful lot of plastic.



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Dr Coffey: It is a lot of plastic, and that is why there are already regulations about the minimum use, which applies regardless of the size of the business and the appropriate need for packaging. It is why we will continue to work as we are doing through the plastic pact, using WRAP and working with the companies signed up to the Ellen MacArthur Foundation to get the bigger suppliers redesigning what they do and looking at what polymers are still needed. In my view, that will flow through the industry, so we will end up with fewer plastics to challenge us.

Q289 **Chair:** Is it worth mentioning to the companies that are below the de minimis amount—you probably do—that we are also mindful that you need to recycle more and be more aware of the plastic that you use? Not to threaten them, but to say you could look at that de minimis threshold again.

Dr Coffey: I don't know the level of detail that the Environment Agency goes into, but, as the regulator, it is a part of their role to undertake audits, which they do, on how people apply the regulations and to suggest changes on whether that should happen in the future. In our consultation, we suggested reforming the system. That is something that we are still considering, but we are concerned about the significant increase that would then happen for enforcement costs, compliance monitoring and the burdens there. We think we have a reasonable balance at the moment, but I would be interested to hear your recommendations.

Q290 **Chair:** I think you probably accept that the message has to be out there loud and clear. You think you are getting it out there, do you?

Dr Coffey: I think we are. There are things that we are keen to announce, including our proposals to extend the plastic bag levy to all retailers, regardless of size. That is a decision that has been taken, even though it may add burden. We are still waiting for the report from the Regulatory Policy Committee before we can proceed with making that effective in law. We will still need to consider the threshold further.

Chair: Right, okay. Angela, please—question No. 2.

Angela Smith: No, it's not me.

Chair: Sorry, that was my fault. No wonder Angela was slightly surprised. Sheryll, please.

Q291 **Mrs Murray:** Thérèse, what are the next steps for the implementation of the various proposals in your waste strategy? How will you assess whether they have had the desired impact?

Dr Coffey: We have set out four key consultations. The Department has done the extended producer responsibility, the deposit return scheme and the consistency, and the Treasury has come forward with a proposal for tax. We are trying to make sure the consultation is considered carefully. We are in this state at the moment where there is going to be a change in Government, so some of the write-round procedures for how we move this forward have to wait just a little bit longer. Officials have been working very hard to come up with recommendations. There is still more work to



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be done. In response to the consultation—particularly on modulated fee, or the other proposal that we suggested, of a deposit way of dealing with packaging—I am minded to go for the modulated fee, as it is more in line with what has come back from industry, but that decision is still to be finalised.

Q292 Mrs Murray: Thank you. Why do the Government's recent waste strategy consultations just focus on improving recycling, with far less emphasis on the prevention of waste in the first place?

Dr Coffey: In our resources and waste strategy, we talked about how we need to get stuff up the waste hierarchy. The priority is still about preventing the creation of waste in the first place; it is just that we will need legislation for quite a lot of these things that we are considering doing. We wanted to get that ready for the Environment Bill. There are other aspects where you don't need legislation. Those sorts of measures on how we can reduce overall waste can still be taken forward.

Mrs Murray: Thank you very much.

Q293 David Simpson: What are the Government doing to encourage a behavioural shift away from single-use food and drink packaging—plastic or otherwise?

Dr Coffey: We have been working closely with other European countries on the single-use plastics directive. That has now been passed, and we now have just under two years to start the transposition. Those sorts of things include polystyrene packaging—I am trying to remember some of the other elements—plastic plates and plastic cutlery. We had already signalled that we were going to do some of that stuff, and we were getting on with it. We are now going to go through the whole process of trying to, in effect, regulate them out.

We have had quite a lot of discussion. People like Tetra Pak have spoken to me about issues connected with straws for milk. Actually, I think the UK market is very high for this sort of packaging, where children drink from the milk cartons. We want to work with them because they are working on technology right now to try to help make that transition. We are in discussion with them about how long that is going to take.

Q294 David Simpson: As well as the producers of plastic, is there engagement with the food industry—meat processors or whatever—regarding single-use plastic?

Dr Coffey: You will be aware of the significant shift in consumer behaviour, with people wanting to carry water bottles around rather than use a single-use cup, even though it may be compostable.

Chair: The only thing is the water bottles should have been filled up with tap water before we came in here, but otherwise it is fine.

Dr Coffey: It is rather warm, so I think my colleague was rather thirsty outside. He does not know Parliament as well as we do. We are seeing a



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shift in consumer behaviour, and suppliers and retailers are also recognising that shift in trying to move away from that.

We still have a very convenience-driven food industry in response to consumer demand, so microwave meals or whatever it is—that sort of thing. There are going to be certain kinds of plastic that will still be the sensible way for that to happen. It will take quite a big shift, I think, in consumer behaviour to radically change what they eat on a daily basis. Again, that is not something that the Government will try to interfere too much with, as we believe in consumer choice in that regard.

Q295 Chair: One of my pet hates is that you still have a lot of potatoes, carrots and other things that are in plastic bags. They do not need to be in plastic bags. There is lots of stuff in supermarkets now. It is very convenient, but they do not need to be in plastic bags. It is all very well to say, "Let it be driven by consumer choice," which is a good thing, but shouldn't the Government be in the business of encouraging the processors and the big retailers not to package things in plastic when they do not need to?

Dr Coffey: We have. It was clear that we wanted to encourage retailers to do plastic-free initiatives and plastic-free aisles. I think you are seeing a change, actually, in a lot of the retailers—they have much more where people pick what they want or pick what they need.

Q296 Chair: We are, but what are you doing to encourage them down this route?

Dr Coffey: We have had direct discussions with the retailers but, again, we tend to use WRAP as our delivery partner to keep those conversations going.

Chris Preston: We have met with supermarkets. WRAP published some technical guidance about the kinds of food that could be sold loose in supermarkets. You are seeing supermarkets doing trials now for selling food loose. At the same time, we obviously want to make sure that, if we are encouraging a particular path, it is well grounded in evidence. We also have objectives around food waste, so the last thing that we want to do is increase food waste.

Chair: Yes, I accept that.

Chris Preston: It is about finding that balance. Exactly as the Minister says, some of it is about consumer choice—so trying to give consumers more choice when they shop.

Dr Coffey: There is a consumer thing about hygiene as well—people going around squeezing pears to see how soft they are, and stuff like that. I am sure that that is not behaviour that any of us would indulge in, but there is an element of consumers having confidence in the hygiene of the food that they are having.

Q297 Chair: But in fairness, Minister, across the world, if you go to the French



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markets and all the rest of it, everybody appears to squeeze everything there and they do not all die.

Dr Coffey: I agree.

Q298 **Chair:** We are getting ourselves into a world where we always have to be so clinically clean that we are wrapping everything in plastic. We are being told all the time that we need to change our lifestyles slightly. Perhaps we need to be a bit more flexible, do we?

Dr Coffey: I am just reflecting reality. It is important that retailers offer that choice. If consumers switch their buying patterns so they are no longer buying bagged vegetables, I think we will see a quicker shift.

Q299 **Chair:** Before I bring in Angela for a supplementary, I will ask a quick one. As we get people away from single-use plastics, we are going to have to be careful that the materials that may be used instead of them are not worse for the environment than the plastic itself. To what degree do you take that on board?

Dr Coffey: This is an important part of why I am careful not to use words like the "scourge" of plastic. It can have benefits. There are alternatives. Even for alternatives to plastic bags, such as paper bags, what really matters is the carbon emissions and how many times a bag can be reused. The quality of the bag and how it reacts with liquids are other things to consider. I am regularly asked why we are not just banning these things. There are good reasons not to ban it, but if there are good alternatives, we should encourage them, too.

Q300 **Angela Smith:** This is a quick question. Chris, do the conversations you are having with supermarkets extend to the consideration of the online supermarket service, which is a growing part of the market? I imagine that would be a very different conversation.

Chris Preston: I think it is in all cases, but again it comes down to how consumers would view that. There is a difference between being able to pick your own fruit and veg, and seeing what you get, and someone else picking it for you and sticking it in a paper bag. That is a consumer issue we need to consider.

Q301 **Angela Smith:** Are you having conversations about online? It is a very different conversation.

Chris Preston: At the moment the conversations are predominantly focused on plastic-free supermarket aisles. I realise that online sales are one of the fastest growing markets, but the current focus is on what we can do in stores, but that is a good point that we will think about.

Q302 **Angela Smith:** Okay, so it is a conversation that has a long way to go.

Chris Preston: Yes.

Q303 **Angela Smith:** This question is about the deposit return scheme. Yesterday, the Secretary of State, Michael Gove, expressed support for an all-in deposit return scheme. In the previous panel, we met



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considerable resistance to the idea of an all-in deposit return scheme. If this becomes Government policy, how will you ensure that it will not “cannibalise” our kerbside system, to quote the Local Authority Recycling Advisory Committee?

Dr Coffey: I am conscious that councils are worried about that. It is fair to say that the majority of what they can sell at the moment is PET bottles. On others, they feel they are incurring costs, rather than getting a revenue stream in.

We need to get more recycled. As it stands, kerbside recycling has plateaued, by and large. In some areas it has gone down. In other areas it is going up. We are removing the exemption, so they must collect certain categories of plastic. We are not dictating how they do it.

I have heard their concerns, but we believe that through the new EPR system, the amount of money going to local authorities for kerbside recycling will be significant and should not alarm them, in terms of what they are trying to achieve in recycling at the kerbside.

Q304 **Angela Smith:** Would it not be better to adopt an on-the-go model? Perhaps that is a gentler way of introducing deposit return, which would avoid threatening the sustainability of the kerbside collections.

Dr Coffey: I don’t think there is any threat to the sustainability of kerbside collections.

Angela Smith: You don’t?

Dr Coffey: No.

Q305 **Angela Smith:** Despite all the evidence that we heard this morning that indicated that it may well do that. Just because the collection has plateaued in terms of volume, it does not justify the introduction of yet another scheme.

Dr Coffey: The on-the-go phraseology is more about the size of the bottles that they are talking about, rather than—

Q306 **Angela Smith:** But that would hit the on-the-go market more. That is the point about the size. It would avoid multi-packs, for instance, which definitely for the most part go into the home. The point about the size is that that does target the on-the-go market.

Dr Coffey: I don’t agree with their assessments. I think some of this is driven by what they are financially concerned about rather than the concept of recycling.

One reason we have tried to get to consistency of household recycling—what every council must collect—is to avoid the confusion that can often happen. The Secretary of State is very keen on the all-in scheme, which is basically packaging up to 3 litres. That will then cover multi-packs, as you say, and the larger bottles of soft or alcoholic drinks. That greater straightforwardness lends itself to consumers; they know they are going to



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pay a deposit, the whole purpose of which is to try to get them recycling much more.

I have the impression that you might see an opportunity where people do not want to have to go back to a retailer that has the certain sized machine for 3-litre bottles; they will just put it in their recycling bin and then councils can get the money for that. It will vary. I am conscious of the concerns, but we are still considering and the final decision has not been made.

Q307 Angela Smith: Minister, that contribution sounded like an elongated justification for the Secretary of State's pet scheme. Doesn't it avoid the point that reforms to produce a responsibility and consistency in recycling collection should be implemented before we resort to a deposit return scheme? Isn't that the bigger priority, or do you consider the DRS to be the bigger priority?

Dr Coffey: We have sent a strong signal about 2023 as the date to change all these systems, because we know it is going to be complicated. As it stands, I want to ensure that a deposit return scheme is in place by 2023. If I could get it earlier, I would. The DRS is different from what the EPR is about. The DRS is about the concept of consumer recycling. The EPR is more about the design of the product and how we get more of a circular economy. They are actually trying to tackle two different things.

Q308 Angela Smith: But the point about the circular economy and extended producer responsibility is that that in itself, combined with consistency of message, which is, "This can be recycled and this cannot," will incentivise consumers to make full use of the recycling services offered by the local authority. That is the point I am trying to make. Surely, extended producer responsibility, the circular economy and conversations with the recycling industry are critically important in maximising the recycling habits of consumers.

Dr Coffey: Correct, and we think the deposit return scheme will increase consumers' desire to recycle what they consume of those kinds of products. That is the rationale for doing this.

Angela Smith: I think it may confuse the message, Chair, but there we go.

Q309 Chair: It is one of those things. In some countries, it is working quite well. It is all right if you do recycle exactly the same plastic bottle because then you can make it again; otherwise it goes into the general recycling. It is just about ensuring that these deposit schemes literally do what they say on the bottle.

Dr Coffey: I saw another one last week in Finland when I was at the EU Environment Council in Helsinki. I have been a bit sceptical about glass and the potential for contamination. They have certain kinds of machines. In bigger stores it seems to work very well. We didn't get the chance to see a smaller store, but that is still more difficult.

Chair: I think there is some argument from the retailers that most of this

reverse vending machine stuff will benefit the big stores.

Angela Smith: Because they will have the money to invest.

Q310 **Chair:** It is interesting that you have taken that into consideration.

Dr Coffey: I have asked for some follow-up information through our ambassador, to understand the glass scheme specifically. Does that mean in that Finland, smaller stores such as corner shops and newsagents tend not to sell glass bottles? If you sell it in Finland, you have to accept it back. We are trying to find out more information on that.

Angela Smith: I will leave it there, Chair.

Q311 **Alan Brown:** Does the Government have a clear position on the potential of biodegradable and compostable packaging?

Dr Coffey: This is a very interesting area. As a Department, we have been cautious within Government about this element, but we do have a strategy that we have worked on with BEIS—a Government biodegradable and bioplastics strategy. We intend to launch a call for evidence later this year to explore the demands, the benefits and the implications of introducing standards on bio-based and biodegradable plastics. I must be open: I am concerned that a lot is being sold as compostable, but it still depends on what your local council does with it.

Q312 **Chair:** Very few of them can actually be composted in your garden; most of it has to be in the mixed.

Dr Coffey: Well, you can't compost them in your garden. You need an industrial composter. The challenge comes on collection differentiation: some people will take their food waste to an anaerobic digester and there is no way you can put this plastic cup in there, but if your council puts food waste and garden waste into a composter then you can. That is why this is rather complicated and why we are cautious about it.

Q313 **Chair:** Are we going to need different kinds of labels for different types of compostable plastic—just to confuse it further?

Dr Coffey: The thing is that I don't really want to have to dictate to councils, "You must do this with your food waste; you must do that with this." Chris, do you want to add some more?

Chris Preston: You already have a recognised European standard for compostable plastics. Basically, if you say, "My product is compostable," it has to be able to go through and meet a series of tests. At the moment, there are no other plastics that meet a standard for biodegradability other than compostable, hence the Minister's talking about our launching a call for evidence about what such a standard could look like. That standard exists and consumers can look at it, but the real question, which I think is what we are concerned with here, is what to do with that at the end of its life.

You do not necessarily want it to go into your recycling bin, because it could contaminate your overall recycling at the other end. As the Minister



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said, where I live I have food waste, so you could put compostables in there, because they send it to composting, but I suspect they pull it out at the other end because they do not know whether it is a compostable plastic or not. There is that confusion, and we are committed to trying to work through it as part of the resources and waste strategy.

Dr Coffey: Some of our retailers—I think it is Waitrose—are trying to experiment, as somebody pointed out to me. Apparently, they have home compostable banana bags now, so they are trying it with aspects of packaging. There are other things we would like to see progress in that sphere—dare I say it, getting rid of the rings around multipacks and stuff like that.

Chris Preston: Places such as the Co-op hand out compostable carrier bags. If they are operating in an area that has composting—as in my local Co-op—if you buy a carrier bag, it is compostable and you can put it in your food waste bin. That is quite practical and sensible, and it is green, so the composting people know it is the right kind of bag to go through the system.

Q314 **Angela Smith:** But not everyone has that.

Chris Preston: But not everyone has access to that.

Q315 **Alan Brown:** Is people's understanding not an issue with the likes of these bags? It is labelled "compostable", which sounds very grand, but it comes back to understanding labelling and what your local authority can do.

Dr Coffey: Labelling is really important. In the consultation, we put forward a proposal and that is something that we intend to design.

Q316 **Alan Brown:** Minister, in your opening remarks you said that you are working closely with the BEIS Department. You have also outlined that your Department is cautious about compostable packaging because of the issues we have touched on, but the BEIS bioeconomy strategy promises to reduce "plastic waste and pollution by developing a new generation of advanced and environmentally sustainable plastics, such as bio-based and biodegradable packaging and bags." The Green Alliance have actually stated that that strategy conflicts with DEFRA's cautious approach. Is that not the case?

Dr Coffey: Don't get me wrong, I think the advance of more bioplastics and biodegradable plastics is a good thing, not a bad thing, but we are the ones responsible for the waste side, and we are conscious of a whole industry and the labelling that needs to be much clearer to consumers on how they use that biodegradable plastic. At the moment, our general systems are not set up as a standard way to deal with that, and that is what we need and want to change.

Q317 **Alan Brown:** So the bioeconomy strategy is in conflict with the bigger picture as you see it?



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Dr Coffey: No, I don't think it is in conflict. I think it is a strategy, so it sets a direction of travel about bioplastics. I think we need to now work with industry with labelling to help consumers, so it can be processed appropriately. We do not want to end up in a situation where by doing what is actually a good thing, we have worse unintended consequences, and that is why we are working on these sorts of proposals.

Q318 **Alan Brown:** In the earlier evidence session, we heard there needs to be a better infrastructure collection system to be able to deal with this.

Dr Coffey: That is the point. The current system is not well established to be able to handle—

Q319 **Alan Brown:** You have agreed that labelling is an issue. You also rightly stated, as we heard in the last evidence session, that there's a bit of concern about how much energy goes into composting material and whether that is the right direction of travel, because plastics might still have a better use. With all these issues, surely these need to be remedied, rather than BEIS having this bioeconomy strategy that could actually drive the development of products when all the other stuff is not in place.

Dr Coffey: That is why we are undertaking the action on labelling, and it is why I referred to the call for evidence that we intend to launch later this year to try and move this along.

Q320 **Alan Brown:** What are the timescales for getting the labelling sorted?

Dr Coffey: Off the top of my head, I don't remember.

Chris Preston: Basically, we need to have everything in place by the time we launch the new scheme, because all the different measures work in tandem together—producer responsibility, new labelling, and review of the packaging essential requirements legislation. Over the next one to two years, we will be working on that. Then, obviously, we have the call for evidence that we want to launch relatively quickly. We will need to analyse and assess what comes back from that, and that will help us to make a determination on a standard that can then apply to biodegradable or bio-based plastics. So the next one to two years, in terms of the overall packaging—

Q321 **Alan Brown:** That will all be in place, then, in one to two years.

Chris Preston: We need to have the systems in place by the time we launch the reformed EPR system, which is scheduled from 2023. All those things need to work in tandem.

Q322 **Chair:** That is four years—2023.

Chris Preston: Launched from 2023. It is a civil service term.

Chair: Oh, right. Just to be absolutely clear.

Q323 **Alan Brown:** We have heard that only 51% of local authorities in England collect food waste separately, so that needs to massively change. What



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are central Government doing to fund that change in infrastructure collection?

Dr Coffey: This will come through as part of the wider EPR reforms. It is a new burden—I think I am right in saying that—

Chris Preston: Yes, it is.

Dr Coffey: Under Government rules, we help the funding of that. The decision on how we sort that out will have to go through, in effect, local authority by local authority. As I say, I am not minded to dictate that food and garden waste cannot be collected together, because in some areas and some communities it may be more convenient to do that. However, the point that is very clear is that they will have to move to a weekly way of disposing of food waste that is not in landfill.

Q324 **Alan Brown:** Surely, then, the argument is going to be cost to councils.

Dr Coffey: Yes, and we will go through the usual processes of how we then get that burden funding to the local authorities.

Q325 **Angela Smith:** I appreciate the importance of extending food waste collection, but local authorities very often now only collect on a three-weekly basis, in a rotation. In my local authority, it is black bin one week, blue bin the next, then the brown, so it is three-weekly collections. The food waste weekly collection—I understand it would have to be weekly, for obvious reasons—would create particularly difficult obstacles for local authorities that have moved to this triple collection model.

Dr Coffey: The way I have seen it work in some authorities around the country is that the biggest model, or the most regular model, tends to be more of a food caddy. That can then be clipped to any bin or clipped inside a bin, so it is still just one round going around. Again, I am not going to dictate to councils precisely how they decide to do this; there is already good practice underway. Chris, would you like to add any more?

Chris Preston: Most local authorities will do weekly, or maybe fortnightly, food waste collection. They have tended to move to longer periods for residual waste, partly because the smelly waste has already been taken out of the bin so there is less of a concern for residents. As the Minister said, and as we said in the resource and waste strategy, we will meet any costs of the transition. That will be part of the implementation costs. We are also looking at where contracts might lead to change for councils. That is partly why there is a lead-in time for a lot of this. We can't just make a change overnight because councils have already signed up to contracts for a number of years. That will all be part of the thinking as we start to roll out the plans. We are working with the Local Government Association, representatives of local government and councils, who are helping us shape our plans and how that will work in practice.

Q326 **Kerry McCarthy:** Can I ask about labelling on whether products are recyclable? I think you accept that it is pretty confusing for consumers at the moment to know whether something can be easily recycled. You have already consulted on a mandatory UK-wide scheme. Is that going to be



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based on the current on-pack recycling labelling scheme, or is it going to be different?

Dr Coffey: It is going to be a distinctive label for what part of the packaging can be recycled. People sometimes look at those triangles with a number in them, which are really about what makes up the main polymer in that particular packaging. We think that a separate label is needed. By mandating what councils need to collect, it should become more straightforward than the current thing, where it depends on your local authority.

Q327 **Kerry McCarthy:** Because the numbers don't mean very much to most people, do they?

Dr Coffey: No.

Q328 **Kerry McCarthy:** They might just see the triangle and think that that means it is recyclable.

Dr Coffey: Yes. That is an international standard.

Q329 **Kerry McCarthy:** That is something that we will still have to do along with the labelling.

Dr Coffey: Yes. It is not within our power to change.

Q330 **Kerry McCarthy:** That is for the benefit of the industry, so they then know, once it goes into the waste—

Dr Coffey: Yes, whether it is polypropylene—

Q331 **Chair:** I suppose for imported food and packaging, you would have to be able to make that work.

Dr Coffey: We want the labelling to be clear about what can be recycled. That will have its own regime. Is that a picture you prepared earlier?

Chris Preston: No, that is the on-pack recycling.

Dr Coffey: The UK plastics packaging industry is already starting to move to this labelling. The on-pack recycling labelling scheme is there to try to make it clear to people what can be done.

Q332 **Kerry McCarthy:** That is what I was asking. Following the consultation, is that the path you are going down?

Dr Coffey: As people will be aware, we have a Government write-round process. That has not cleared through, so some of this will now need to wait for the new Government. That will take only another week or so. Then it can continue its journey.

Q333 **Kerry McCarthy:** Okay. So you want to improve labelling, but you just haven't quite nailed it. Do you have a proposal that you are trying to put through? I don't know whether Chris can say a bit more.

Chris Preston: What we said in the resource and waste strategy is that we want to make it clear for consumers whether things can or cannot be



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recycled, and that needs to match up with the producer responsibility changes. If we adopt the modulated fees approach, those things will be harder to recycle or will have a higher modulated fee. That is how the system usually works. What we would like to be able to see is, "This can be recycled" or, "This can't be recycled", so consumers know that if it is a particular type of packaging, they just stick it in their residual waste bin or put it in their recycling bin. We are introducing consistency in collections as well, and it will link to that. It will be an England-level system, because obviously the devolved Administrations have their own arrangements around those things.

Q334 Kerry McCarthy: Does that suggest that you wouldn't want to move to a new labelling scheme until some of the other things were in place? For example, we are clearly some way from having consistency in what is collected locally. Do you need to wait until you have achieved more consistency and introduced the other changes before you introduce a new labelling scheme?

Dr Coffey: What has happened with the recycling labelling scheme is that they still have to put "widely recycled" or "check your local authority". Once we get to mandatory consistency, we will be able to update that.

Q335 Kerry McCarthy: You should be able to do that, okay. This Green Dot logo that appears on some things basically means that the producer has made a financial contribution towards the recovery and recycling of packaging in Europe. Is that helpful for consumers? It does not say anything about the particular product but about the producer.

Dr Coffey: No, it is just a brand marketing sort of thing, on a European scale. I am not aware that we are planning to regulate or get rid of it.

Q336 Kerry McCarthy: But it does mislead people. Does it run the risk of contaminating the recycling chain? I would interpret that symbol as meaning that a product is recyclable, rather than a statement about what the company gets up to more broadly.

Dr Coffey: I understand that. I hope that the on-packaging labelling that is now part of that programme will make it much more straightforward to people. Candidly, manufacturers can then decide whether it is still worthwhile to put on that green dot.

Q337 Kerry McCarthy: But if you have a product where, on the face of it, the company will put their marketing blurb—there is a lot of greenwashing around at the moment. There are certain ads in tube stations. I will not mention the company, but they make great play about some aspects of biodegradability, when we know perfectly well that the product is not particularly ethical in all sorts of other ways. I digress. There is a danger that the green dot is on the front and people think, "I will go for this, because it has that on the front", without actually looking for the recycling details until they go to put it in the bin, or maybe not even then.

Dr Coffey: There is no doubt that we need to do a good public information communication to go alongside this. I genuinely think that the changes to



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the EPR system will also motivate manufacturers to try to make as much of their products as easy to recycle as possible, in line with our new approach. We will have to do quite a lot to inform consumers.

Q338 Chair: Minister, isn't there a possibility of a green feelgood factor? You stick this label on a product, but it doesn't actually mean that it will be recycled, although a lot of people picking up products with that green dot on will surely think exactly that. Aren't we in danger of going down the routes that Kerry alluded to, in the tube station, where all sorts of things are out there? It is really good marketing now to stick a green sticker on something. That does not mean to say that it will be recycled or composted or anything. It just makes people feel better. I like people to feel better—we all like that—but it ought to actually be doing what it says on the label. I am not sure that this does.

Dr Coffey: There are all sorts of schemes that food companies and others sign up to, such as Fairtrade or the whatever alliance and stuff like this. I think it is down to consumers to understand what it is that they are trying to do. We intend to have a clear labelling system for recycling. On all these other dots or logos all over the place, I am not sure that the Government need to get into that area.

Q339 Chair: I understand that it is an international label anyway, but we are in danger of its being used as a marketing tool and meaning absolutely nothing.

Dr Coffey: Well, it is; it is only a marketing tool.

Q340 Chair: I know, but the trouble is that it will make the public very sceptical, if they are not careful. Products will have these things on, and then there will be a programme showing that it is not being recycled, and then everybody will decide that everything with the Green Dot is fraudulent, if you like. Isn't there a danger of over-labelling and people then becoming sceptical?

Dr Coffey: You used the word "fraudulent". I don't think the Green Dot campaign has ever tried to suggest elements of that, but it is—

Q341 Chair: Misleading then, Minister, if you don't want to say fraudulent.

Dr Coffey: It is a marketing tool that manufacturers, for whatever reason, seem to think matters, so they pay money to somebody. Dare I say it—this is a tangent—it is a bit like having a blue flag beach. You have to pay for a blue flag, you don't just get one, but some people decide that it is important to help promote their beach over somebody else's. It is just a marketing tool. I think that our labelling process needs to be clear for consumers: if you buy this, you can be certain what it is.

Q342 Chair: But the consumer does not differentiate between what is a marketing tool and—

Dr Coffey: How do you know?

Chair: They don't. I am not saying that no consumers do. Many consumers are discerning, but an awful lot of others are not. Don't we



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take four or five seconds to decide on what we buy in the retailer? Are you telling me that they will look at all the labels, and decide which one is real and which is not in four seconds?

Dr Coffey: If it matters to them, they will.

Q343 **Chair:** Isn't it your job to ensure that it is not misleading?

Dr Coffey: I don't think it is misleading, because it is not actually suggesting it is recyclable.

Q344 **Kerry McCarthy:** I think it is totally suggesting that it is recyclable. I am quite into this sort of thing and I didn't know what it meant. I would have just looked at it and thought it meant that it was recyclable. When you look at food packaging more generally, there is a lot of misleading information.

Chair: Surely, a green dot with a black arrow going around it like that leads you to assume that it will be recycled.

Kerry McCarthy: I think we know what will be recommended in our report—put it that way.

Dr Coffey: I can see a campaign coming on in Bristol East.

Chair: I might join Kerry on this occasion.

Dr Coffey: It is a European marketing tool. I understand the prospect of a campaign that may come.

Q345 **Chair:** It is a serious point, Minister, because I think it does mislead people when they pick that up. It is put on there in the first place, in my view, by those companies, to ensure that people think it is recyclable when it is not. It is like processed food: you see the stamp of a Union Jack flag and then you find that the food is imported. A lot of that has gone now, but it is the same sort of thing.

Dr Coffey: My colleague has a good suggestion for the Committee.

Chris Preston: If people suspect false advertising, they can refer cases to the Advertising Standards Authority.

Q346 **Kerry McCarthy:** It's not really false advertising though, because they would have met the criteria of what that logo actually means, in that it means that they give money, but it is misleading in the broader sense, in that people would not know what it strictly meant.

Dr Coffey: It might be worth trying with the ASA.

Kerry McCarthy: I think people would say, "Are you entitled to use the Green Dot? Yes, you are, because you give money to this scheme." But that is different for the consumer.

Dr Coffey: But if you think it is misleading—

Q347 **Chair:** I suspect we will put something in our report about it and you will



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be able to look at it as a Government, and perhaps decide later down the road that you would like to adopt it. We will give you some time to do that, because it usually takes time for that to filter through.

I want to go back to compostable plastics, because it is interesting. I know that Kerry wanted to ask this question, but she had to go. Should compostable plastic only be used in a business environment, where there can be separate collection and it can be sent for composting? For instance, it would be very useful at the Glastonbury festival, because you collect them and then they get composted.

One problem that we were talking about earlier is that some local authorities would take them out if they were put into food waste for traditional composting; others would take it to a biodigester unit, where it would not be good for the mix at all. We are in danger of trying to be good for the environment, but messing up various collection systems and contaminating other plastics.

Do we need to do a bit more? At the moment, we are wringing our hands and saying that it is all a little bit difficult, but what do we want to do about it? I am not against these plastics, but we have to work out what they actually are and what we do with them.

Dr Coffey: I'm not wringing my hands either. We are actively considering the different kinds of packaging. There is the whole issue of cartons as well. You are starting to find that far fewer councils are collecting cartons, because of the challenges of the designs of the MRFs—the industry suggests that they are not so straightforward. There is a plant in Halifax which deals with that; they also deal with coffee cups, as do other places around the country.

I am not sure why councils are not taking up the offer from coffee chains—I think it was Costa—to pay councils to collect coffee cups and send them to ACE, which is just outside Halifax. Very few councils have taken up that offer of support. A lot of coffee chains now say, "We'll take any coffee cup, any brand, and make sure it gets recycled and processed." I'm not sure yet how well that regime is working, but it is something we—

Q348 **Chair:** But you can see the value of trying to collect these things and separate them, because if you're not careful you're going to end up contaminating other plastics. That's the problem.

Dr Coffey: Yes. We are very alert to that. That is why it is still under active consideration, and why we are working with the industry.

Q349 **Chair:** Just one final question. Will exempting pre-filled imported packaging from the plastic packaging tax cause more food and drink to be imported, because theoretically I suppose it will be slightly cheaper?

Dr Coffey: I think that the responses to the consultation have been very informative, and don't be surprised if there is now a response to that coming up.

Q350 **Chair:** What is it, "Read my lips—no new taxes"? In this instance, it could be a new tax. Is that right? What are you saying, Minister?



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Dr Coffey: No. The Treasury consulted on the tax. I think it has been pointed out to it that there are many products that come into this country that would not be covered by the proposals, so I think Treasury will respond to that.

Q351 **Chair:** From an international trade point of view, can we actually do that?

Dr Coffey: I believe so, yes.

Q352 **Chair:** It would be good if we can, because I think it keeps everybody on a level playing field and also it generates income. In addition, when there is alternative packaging that may be slightly more expensive, it will help with that as well, won't it?

Dr Coffey: Yes. The purpose of the tax is not just to generate income—that is not the reason for doing it—but to change design. It is very deliberate. I am also conscious of the issues about food-grade plastic, and they are being very carefully considered as well. However, the responses to the consultation were very helpful in informing the future policy.

Q353 **Chair:** Finally, how do you respond to concerns that the 30% recycled content threshold ignores the prohibition on using recycled materials for some food-contact applications? That's quite a technical question.

Dr Coffey: You will be aware that the Food Standards Agency is directly responsible for this legislation. There is a particular relevant EU regulation—I asked officials to find it and it is No. 282/2008—which is about articles that come into contact with food.

The European Food Safety Authority deals with that, in conjunction with the Commission and member states. We want to work on that, but we need to ensure that food safety is the priority. Nevertheless, we are aware of the concerns about how things may or may not get covered when people actually cannot do anything else apart from that sort of process on plastics. Do you want to add a bit more, Chris?

Chris Preston: Yes. There is a process in Europe, so people can get their plant certified to say, "Our processors are safe and the product that comes out the other end is safe for contact with food." A number of UK companies have gone through that process and so are accredited to produce food-grade, safe recycled packaging content. Obviously, over time we would hope that more companies apply through that process, so that they can produce material that can help to meet the 30% recycled content.

Q354 **Chair:** I think we have covered the issue quite well in this session, but we are naturally concerned as we do our inquiry—as I am sure are you, Minister; indeed, you have stated that you are—that we reduce the amount of plastic we use, but also that food safety remains paramount. We have to think about vacuum packing and the length of time that food can be kept before being eaten so that there is not as much food waste. We have got to try to balance the two. I am sure that that is what you give quite a lot of time to, Minister, is it?



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Dr Coffey: Yes. That is why there is active discussion with the Food Standards Agency on it.

Chris Preston: Industry made that point quite strongly, as part of the process during the four consultations as well. It is something that we are very much alive to when thinking about future policy development.

Q355 **Chair:** It is the same with biodegradable plastic. Some of that may work for vacuum packing, and other types may not. What do we do about separating the different ones, when we have different types of plastic wrapping around the same product? Minister, I know you will say it is up to the consumers and they will know exactly what to do with it, but I am not quite so convinced that they will. You obviously have great faith in our consumers, which is very laudable.

Dr Coffey: Of course, they are our voters.

Chair: I still think we need a bit more help making those decisions.

Dr Coffey: As I say, the issue is live. Food Standards Scotland and the Food Standards Agency are tasking up their capacity to replace the EFSA, but the Department of Health is the ministerial lead. The discussion is there.

Q356 **Chair:** Are we likely to hear something from the Food Standards Agency in the near future, do you think?

Dr Coffey: I don't know about the near future.

Chair: It's in the mix; okay. Thank you very much Minister and Chris. It has been a good session. We will do the heads of report this afternoon and start getting our report together.

Dr Coffey: Fabulous; thank you.