

Thank you very much for inviting me to contribute to this very intense and expert day, and can I start out by telling you a little about myself.

I have been the Shadow Minister for Waste and Recycling since the end of October, and so I am currently undergoing a steep learning curve. I'm afraid I am not going to be able to tell you in detail what Labour's policy on Waste and Recycling is, because we're still working on that. And it is quite difficult for me to focus on what is going to be a major task because as you may have noticed there's a slight distraction going on in Westminster at the moment. That doesn't just mean taking part in Brexit debates and striving to explain my Brexit position to my constituents, it also means involvement in the Bills and Statutory Instruments which are an inevitable consequence of having to prepare for Brexit.

On the other hand, I did come into this role with a small degree of prior understanding, albeit some years out of date. As a County Councillor, I chaired the Suffolk Joint Municipal Waste Management Strategy and helped steer the introduction of a three-bin collection system with a clean MRF for dry recyclates and windrow composting for green waste. We raised the County's household waste recycling rate from – off the top of my head – 14.7% to 43% over the course of three years, between 2001 and 2004.

I don't just say that in order to try to claim some credentials. Firstly, it shows that a significant step change in behaviour of the general public, is perfectly possible in a relatively short period of time if the new system is attractive enough and simple enough to use. We were not bribing people to behave properly, we did use a certain amount of public education and publicity but there were no sanctions involved, but people changed the way they dealt with their waste because we made it straightforward and convenient for them to do so. And there was some evidence that they changed the way they thought about waste too – the highest level of recycling prior to the introduction of kerbside dry recycling collections was glass taken to bring sites. We decided not to try to collect glass in the kerbside bins because it would be difficult and dangerous to handle in the MRF – but once the bins were introduced the level of glass being taken to the bring-sites actually increased too. Because they were thinking about the different elements of their waste and separating them out in order to recycle them, people started to approach the concepts of waste and recycling in a different way.

Secondly, although that step-change in recycling was replicated around most of the country between 2000 and 2008, there has been very little increase in household waste recycling in the UK since 2010. I do not believe that national or local government have taken the challenge of waste seriously enough over the past 8 years, and I am not convinced that they are taking it seriously enough now. Our Waste, Our Resources, the Government's new strategy, while refreshingly forward-looking in its expressions of general intention, is woefully lacking in urgency or specific commitments. Too many of the planned actions are for 2023 – after the next General Election, and so conveniently not demanding action now. The target for 65% recycling of municipal solid waste by 2035 is frankly pathetic – with the right level of infrastructure investment and incentives for good practice I am quite sure that target could have already been achieved, and I believe it has already been achieved in several European countries.

But I am not here to talk about the Government's strategy. I want to share with you what I believe are sound basic principles for a coherent national waste strategy and then suggest a few general consequences of those principles which might affect the way manufacturers – and in particular packaging producers – behave.

We all know about the Circular Economy and the hierarchy of waste – at least I think we think we do. But I am going to be Devil's Advocate here. There is no self-evident reason why, for every item, recreating another similar item from its materials is necessarily more sustainable than finding an ecologically friendly way of disposing of it and creating a new item from raw materials. Clearly in many cases recycling will be the best practicable environmental option – and I make no apologies for using an old term, sometimes the old ones are the best - but I believe we need an objective or objectives against which to measure whether a particular option is the best.

The main drivers for a better and more sustainable way with waste surely must be to reduce Climate Change & to eliminate Environmental Pollution. These two are not the same. If I create a plastic bag from fossil fuel and then release it into the ocean, there is some climate change emission inherent in the manufacture, but very much less than the emissions from incinerating that plastic bag. And yet the environmental impact of that bag on wildlife in the ocean is probably greater than any impact from incinerating it would have been. A balance needs to be struck between environmental pollution and degradation on the one hand, and climate change emissions on the other. Very often, the solution which is best for reducing climate change is also the best for reducing pollution, but that is not always going to be the case.

There are increasingly difficult choices to be made, which is why I am not convinced that simply invoking the hierarchy or claiming that something contributes to the circular economy are always going to be sufficient to determine which choice is most environmentally friendly. Reuse stands above recycle, and yet the days when milk-bottles were collected from the doorstep, washed, and refilled with milk are now gone. If we do re-introduce reuse schemes for bottles, we need to calculate the transport impact, the energy used in washing, and the level of wastage, and compare that with the energy costs of recycling the same glass. I'm not making a judgement either way, but the calculations have to be done before we can say "this way is more environmentally friendly than that way".

When it comes to making a choice of materials – especially for packaging which by its nature is unlikely to be re-used – calculating the climate change impact of the various options and ensuring no environmental pollution results from one choice rather than the other, seem to me to be essential to making the right environmental choice.

The decisions that Government makes, and the decisions that manufacturers make, need to be based on these calculations, and not on fashionable or knee-jerk reactions against certain materials or products. Clearly some materials and products are unhelpful, and I am certainly not suggesting that some of them won't need to be phased out altogether – cosmetic microbeads are a very good example, and I am hopeful that we can consign them to the same dustbin of history as Chloro-Flouro-

Carbons. But if our antipathy to plastics is so great that we start to use non-plastic items or packaging which actually have a worse impact on the environment, then clearly something is wrong. We need to know what the impact will be on Climate change, and what the pollution level will be, before deciding which material we should use for each application.

These considerations also apply to whether or not it makes sense to try to recycle a product. I'm not going to single out any one product, but if it takes more embedded carbon to transport a particular item to a recycling plant, to separate it into its component materials, to render those materials into a useable form, and then to use those recyclates in the production of a new item, than it does to create the item from raw materials – and we do need to include the carbon cost of mining the raw materials and the carbon emissions of incinerating the used item in this equation, then I cannot see the benefit of recycling that item. In many cases, such difficult-to-recycle items might best be substituted by easier-to-recycle items, rather than by trying to find ever more ingenious ways to recycle them.

One particular bugbear is the use of the words “recyclable” and “compostable”. It is of no real interest to a policy-maker whether an item is theoretically recyclable, if in fact it is not recycled. I will be looking for actual recycling rates, actual composting rates, actual environmental emissions rates. Where something could be recycled if the right infrastructure were in place I would want to know whether there is a reasonable expectation that the right infrastructure will actually be in place any time soon, because if not, the claimed recyclability is purely hypothetical. And that infrastructure doesn't just mean the actual recycling plant, it also means the ability to get the item to the recycling plant. And policy makers don't want to deal in token abilities either. If an item is claimed to be recyclable, and 5% or less of the items are actually being recycled, then I don't think that counts. That doesn't mean that attempts to deal with difficult materials are always a bad thing, but it does mean that most of the time it will probably be better to use less difficult materials in the first place. There are some very large companies producing some very hard-to-deal-with waste items which really ought – if they aren't already – to be looking at completely different solutions to the customers' demands which they can offer in future, so that they can move away from the current problematic product.

I fully understand the need to develop brand reputations which make the customer feel good about purchasing a particular brand. And that can be a real force for environmental good too. An effective waste strategy is not just about persuading manufacturers, either through regulation or financial measures, to minimise the environmental impact of their products. It is also about educating and empowering consumers, and manufacturers and retailers have at least as important a role to play in that as government. But companies need to be aware that “green wash” – creating superficial or incidental environmental schemes which have no significant effect on the environmental impact of their products – is increasingly likely to be found out in the era of social media, and consumers rendered cynical by finding out about such practices are that much less likely to believe in other claims from the same company, whether true or not. A genuine commitment to environmental protection, on the other hand, can gradually build a level of trust amongst consumers which is very difficult to lose.

There is a high level of political consensus about the need to reduce the environmental impact of our material things. I do believe that as a society we may just decide to reduce some of our use of things altogether, but I don't believe that it will be politically acceptable for most of that reduction to be driven by government action – it will need to be a matter of choice for the citizen. I think manufacturers and retailers have a responsibility both to society and to their own reputations to choose to use items and materials that last longer, or that can be reused, or easily recycled, and sustainably disposed of at end of life. The present Government talks of using the “polluter pays” principle to achieve better whole-life planning from the manufacturers – I'm not clear exactly how that can be achieved, I am not wholly convinced of the effectiveness of current payments systems, but it would be a laudable achievement if the whole life of a product from raw materials to recycling and eventual end-of-life disposal could be planned and costed into its design.

I think we need to use overall lifetime impact on climate change as our main measure for determining what the best materials are for each application. And I look forward to being part of a Government that is determined to use education and public procurement as well as financial and regulatory instruments in order to empower our manufacturers to do their best by the environment.