



**Cynulliad Cenedlaethol Cymru  
The National Assembly for Wales**

**Y Pwyllgor Cynaliadwyedd  
The Sustainability Committee**

**Dydd Iau, 22 Mai 2008  
Thursday, 22 May 2008**

**Cynnwys**  
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Cofnodir y trafodion hyn yn yr iaith y llefarwyd hwy ynddi yn y pwyllgor. Yn ogystal, cynhwysir cyfieithiad Saesneg o gyfraniadau yn y Gymraeg.

These proceedings are reported in the language in which they were spoken in the committee.  
In addition, an English translation of Welsh speeches is included.

**Aelodau'r pwyllgor yn bresennol**  
**Committee members in attendance**

Lorraine Barrett	Llafur Labour
Alun Davies	Llafur Labour
Nerys Evans	Plaid Cymru (yn dirprwyo ar ran Alun Ffred Jones) The Party of Wales (substitute for Alun Ffred Jones)
Michael German	Democratiaid Rhyddfrydol Cymru (Cadeirydd y Pwyllgor Dros Dro) Welsh Liberal Democrats (Temporary Committee Chair)
Lesley Griffiths	Llafur Labour
Darren Millar	Ceidwadwyr Cymreig Welsh Conservatives
Leanne Wood	Plaid Cymru The Party of Wales

**Eraill yn bresennol**  
**Others in attendance**

Jane Milne	Cyfarwyddwr yr Amgylchedd Busnes, Consortiwm Manwerthu Prydain Director of Business Environment, British Retail Consortium
Dr Richard Swannell	Cyfarwyddwr Rhaglenni Manwerthu a Materion Organig, Rhaglen Weithredu'r Cynllun Gwastraff ac Adnoddau Director of Retail and Organics Programmes, Waste and Resources Action Programme

**Swyddogion Gwasanaeth Seneddol y Cynulliad yn bresennol**  
**Assembly Parliamentary Service officials in attendance**

Dr Virginia Hawkins	Clerc Clerk
Annette Stafford	Dirprwy Glerc Deputy Clerk

*Dechreuodd y cyfarfod am 1 p.m.*  
*The meeting began at 1 p.m.*

**Cyflwyniad, Ymddiheuriadau a Dirprwyon**  
**Introduction, Apologies and Substitutions**

[1] **Michael German:** Good afternoon, and welcome to this meeting of the Sustainability Committee at which we will take further evidence on the petition for banning plastic bags. Before I begin, I will make the usual housekeeping announcements. In the event of a fire, please follow the instructions of the ushers and leave via the marked fire exits. There is no drill scheduled for today, so, if an alarm goes off, it will be real. Please ensure that all of your electronic devices are turned off. I am part of a pilot scheme of Assembly Members taking their laptops to committee. They are all wirelessly connected, and so, while this is switched on, it will not interfere with the broadcast equipment but your BlackBerrys and so on will.

[2] The committee operates bilingually. Channel 1 of the headsets provides the simultaneous translation and channel 0 can be used for amplification of the original

contribution if you are hard of hearing. Please do not touch the buttons on the microphones as they are operated manually.

[3] I have received apologies from Alun Ffred Jones, and Nerys Evans is substituting for him. I am substituting for Mick Bates and, having received a call from him, I can tell you that he is in good spirits and is recovering from his operation. He must now ensure that he stays stable and does not move around too much, or he would be in danger of upsetting the work of the operations.

[4] We have also received apologies from Brynle Williams and from Karen Sinclair. I will write to Karen on behalf of the committee and send her our best wishes in the struggle that she faces.

1.03 p.m.

### **Ystyried Deiseb P-03-063, sy'n galw am Wahardd Bagiau Plastig Consideration of Petition P-03-063, calling for a Ban on Plastic Bags**

[5] **Michael German:** We will continue to take evidence today on the petition that the National Assembly has received calling for a ban on plastic bags. We will hear from the British Retail Consortium and the Waste and Resources Action Programme. We will focus on their work in monitoring the environmental impact of carrier bags and agreeing a baseline figure from which to measure reduction as well as views on a potential ban and such alternatives as a levy or other voluntary action.

[6] I welcome Jane Milne, the director of business environment at the British Retail Consortium, and Dr Richard Swannell, the director of the retail and organics programme with the Waste and Resources Action Programme. Jane, could you give a short presentation on your paper and we will then move to questions from Members? The same goes for you, Richard.

[7] **Ms Milne:** As a Portsmouth girl, I am here with slight trepidation, but thanks for a good FA Cup final last Saturday anyway. [*Laughter.*]

[8] The BRC represents retailers across the UK, both large and small. We have 30,000 small and independent retailers in our membership, as well as the large supermarkets and large chain fascias, and food and non-food retailers. So, there is a broad spectrum of different interests in our membership.

[9] I will pull out a few key points from the paper that we submitted earlier this week. The first point to emphasise is that retailers very much support action being taken to reduce the use and environmental impact of single-use carrier bags, but we are anxious that any action taken be proportionate and targeted at the underlying attitudes, and do not deal simply with some of the symptoms. It is our understanding that a ban on plastic bags would not be legal under EU law. For example, when the French tried to take forward such a measure, they were required to withdraw it.

[10] To underline our commitment, we are party to a voluntary agreement with WRAP, the UK Government, and the devolved administrations on reducing the impact of carrier bags, and we are committed to making progress on that. However, we do not feel that this is among the most important issues on the sustainability agenda and we want to focus on measures that will make a real difference. At the end of April, we launched an initiative called A Better Retailing Climate that set out 21 areas of action that our members signed up to voluntarily to take forward over the next five years, where we think we can make a much bigger contribution, both directly in our own operations and in assisting our customers and suppliers

to make their businesses and behaviours more sustainable. In particular, we feel that our efforts should be focused on: reducing emissions from buildings and transport; reducing packaging, both within the retail chain and in relation to the packaging that gets through to the customer; increasing re-use and recycling, within our own businesses and by customers; dealing with end-of-life products, such as batteries, electrical equipment and so on; and promoting energy efficiency. So, we want to strike a balance between the amount of effort and energy that we focus on these different areas.

[11] Finally, we are happy to take things forward on a voluntary basis to get to a tipping point in consumer behaviours. We have had extensive discussions with Hilary Benn at Westminster and Richard Lockhead in Edinburgh on these issues. In Scotland, last week, we concluded joint voluntary action with the Scottish Government, and we would be interested to explore a similar approach with you.

[12] **Dr Swannell:** Thank you very much for the opportunity to speak to you this afternoon about carrier bags. I will draw out three things from my paper. I want to talk about WRAP and what we do, about the existing voluntary agreement, and about our view on a ban on plastic bags. I will take those in turn.

[13] WRAP is a not-for-profit company that is grant-funded by the Welsh Assembly Government, the Scottish Government, the Northern Ireland Executive and the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. Our role is to help businesses, individuals, and local authorities to reduce waste and to recycle more things more often, thereby reducing the amount of waste that we put in landfill and tackling climate change. To give you an example of what we do, we are working on reducing the impact of the 6.7 million tonnes of food waste that we throw away every year. We are doing that by helping to minimise the amount that we throw away in the home through the Love Food, Hate Waste campaign, encouraging home composting and food waste collections, encouraging the recycling of food into compost and the outputs of anaerobic digestion, and developing the markets for those materials, for example, in agriculture and in landscaping.

[14] On carrier bags, we are working with the Governments of the UK, the British Retail Consortium, and the retailers to establish a voluntary agreement to reduce the environmental impact of the bags by 25 per cent by the end of this year. The agreement was signed by all the major supermarkets and many representatives of high-street retailers. The agreement established the baseline use of carrier bags in the UK at 13.4 billion bags a year in 2006. We monitored the progress of that agreement in February this year and found a 14 per cent reduction in the environmental impact and 1 billion fewer bags used. That indicated that the agreement was on course to hit its 25 per cent target by the end of the year.

1.10 p.m.

[15] So, what do we think about a ban? We do not think that an outright ban on plastic bags only is a good approach, as it may have the unintended consequence of moving people into using heavier bags such as paper bags. We said, for example, in our submission to the Scottish Government when it was thinking about Mike Pringle's Bill, that any action should be focused on all bags rather than on one particular material. We are in favour of the voluntary approach. If that is not ultimately successful then any regulatory or legislative approach may need to consider taking action on all bags and the question of what to do with any resources that are garnered from that process should be thought about. Those resources could be used to encourage other sorts of environmental behaviours, such as reducing food waste and improving recycling.

[16] **Michael German:** I will start by picking up a point that Jane made, and this question is to both of you. Jane, you said that this is not one of the most important issues. In your view,

where does it sit in the hierarchy of issues in terms of its significance not just for the waste strategy but also for the environmental strategy and in terms of its environmental impact? Where does the plastic carrier bag issue sit in that hierarchy?

[17] **Ms Milne:** In terms of environmental impact, we believe that it is vanishingly small. Its importance is in its symbolism of a throw-away society and in about how you engage consumers more generally in thinking about that. There is a great deal of danger of pinning too much on the carrier bag so that that is all that people focus on, rather than on the many other issues that they ought to tackle that could have a far greater impact.

[18] **Dr Swannell:** The weight of the carrier bags thrown away is about 110,000 tonnes a year. We throw away 6.7 million tonnes of food waste. In our bins, there is about 5.9 million tonnes of packaging, and the total amount of waste that we throw away is somewhere around 30 million tonnes across the year. So, in tonnes terms, carrier bags make a relatively modest contribution. I agree with Jane that the carrier bag is an icon of a throw-away society. That is the major issue. If you encourage us all to reuse bags, will that mean that we will do other things for the environment, such as recycling things more often and reducing food waste? That is the big win, but as to whether it will have a big effect on landfill and climate change, the answer is 'no'.

[19] **Michael German:** So, in a sense, it is the front end rather than the back end. We are looking at the environmental impact in terms of what it will do to change attitudes and to inspire people to do more. That, rather than its impact on the back end, is where you believe that its importance lies.

[20] **Dr Swannell:** Yes. The other thing that came out of the Irish experience was that there was less visible litter. So that is one of the other benefits that we might think about. One of the things about remembering to reuse your bags is that it is a conscious decision. It is a behavioural thing. It is remembering to have the bags in your rucksack or in the back of the car when you go shopping. It is about thinking it through and making a conscious decision to do it. Frankly, 30 years ago, we all did it. It was just a normal way of behaving. If we get into that habit, we might more easily say, 'Okay, I have done that bit, now I shall think about the amount of food that I throw away', or think about making a bit more effort to recycle or doing something about the insulation in the house. These are little things that we can all do that make a difference. That is where the win is.

[21] **Darren Millar:** I accept that this is an icon of a throw-away society. Quite rightly, Richard, you referred to the visible impact of plastic bag litter on the environment, and I think that we would all agree that while, in terms of weight, plastic bag litter might be a very small amount, it is a huge eyesore that leads to people being more casual about other kinds of litter. When people see existing litter, they are more likely to litter, and there is a link between crime and grime and so on.

[22] Jane, you referred to the problem with regard to public attitudes. You mentioned people having to remember to take things to the shops, but the fact is that there is an appetite among the public to address this problem and that is why we are discussing it today. It is the public that has brought this to the table and said, 'We want some action on this'. So, I cannot quite see why you do not think that there is significant public appetite to address this problem. You seem to suggest that the public attitude towards this is quite low down the scale.

[23] **Ms Milne:** There are 13 billion bits of evidence to show that the public might say one thing but do something rather different at the moment and that is why we need to do much more to help engage them. The Irish route has been effective in reducing the number of single-use carrier bags, but it may have resulted in increasing environmental impacts in other ways, because of what has been substituted for those. However, there is no evidence that I am

aware of that it has, in any way, changed overall attitudes in Ireland about resource use and the way that we look after things. The danger of pinning too much on the carrier bag is that you lose the message and you do not engage people in all of the other things that we also need to do.

[24] **Lorraine Barrett:** I just wanted to ask Richard, in particular, a question. If we were looking at banning the single-use carrier bag in supermarkets, people like me and my family would still have to buy plastic bags to put their recycling in—we buy white ones so that when people come to collect it they can see what is in it and that we have put the right stuff out. Do you have any knowledge of the amount of plastic bags that we would still be using?

[25] **Dr Swannell:** There has been no systematic study done on that and there is no question that the research that has been done on this suggests that, even though we do not reuse carrier bags for shopping, we reuse them for other things in the home. One thing that the voluntary agreement has done is enabled lots of new things to be trialled in store to see what helps us as consumers to remember to bring bags back. That is the key challenge here, because we can do this, but if we did decide to stop this now—and I have already said that we would not support a ban on just plastic bags, but on all bags, otherwise you will get a shift to something that may result in an unintended negative consequence—it is worth thinking through the implications for buying other things, such as bin liners, but no systematic analysis, to my knowledge, has been done on that yet.

[26] **Michael German:** Alun wants to come in on the same question.

[27] **Alun Davies:** I am interested in these two different issues and in the relationship between behavioural change, which is what we are seeking to drive here, and the iconic place of the plastic bag, because, like it or not, it is the most important issue in terms of waste management. It is, as you said, an iconic issue in terms of how we deal with different materials and waste in society. I agree very much with what you said about driving behavioural change, but if we are going to do that, is it not true that we have to use an iconic issue in order to drive much wider changes in people's behaviour? If we use a plastic bag as this icon, and say that we want to people change their behaviour in this way, will we, at the same time, be able to make people think and enable them to change their behaviour in other ways as well?

[28] **Ms Milne:** It depends on how much weight and focus you put on bags alone. The big chain supermarkets have quite integrated campaigns on this sort of issue that address plastic bags, either by giving you some bonus points or by having in-store promotions and special weekends, and so on. Interestingly, Sainsbury's was saying that customers have understood the message about needing to use a bag for life. It has held four promotional weekends, or whatever, on this now, and on the fourth one it did not give away bags for life because the message that they were getting from customers was, 'I have enough bags for life to last me a lifetime, but what I need to do is to remember to bring them with me'. So, alongside all of that, it has promotions of energy-efficient light bulbs and recycling centres in the car park and is promoting a whole range of things to get the whole of the sustainability issue across. Plastic bags are part of the message, but they are not the totality of the message.

1.20 p.m.

[29] **Alun Davies:** So, you do not believe that you can use this issue of plastic bags to communicate other messages, and to drive much wider behavioural change?

[30] **Ms Milne:** It is all right to use it as an example, provided that you put that example in context. There is a great danger if you drive business and customers down the route of just dealing with this issue, as a result of taking quite radical and statutory action, rather than

allowing voluntary measures to be part of a suite of measures, because there are only so many resources available in a business, and if it is switched to implementing a piece of legislation in this area, that means that it is not doing something else.

[31] **Nerys Evans:** Diolch am eich tystiolaeth. O ystyried targed Llywodraeth y Cynulliad, erbyn 2009-10, na fydd gwastraff cartref yn fwy na lefelau 1997-98, sydd yn golygu gostyngiad o 4 y cant bob blwyddyn o 2006-07 i 2009-10, a ydych yn credu bod lle i ymrwymiad Courtauld fod yn fwy uchelgeisiol?

**Nerys Evans:** Thank you for your evidence. Bearing in mind the Assembly Government's target that, by 2009-10, household waste will not be greater than 1997-98 levels, which means a 4 per cent reduction every year from 2006-07 to 2009-10, do you believe that there is room for the Courtauld commitment to be more ambitious?

[32] **Dr Swannell:** If I understood the question correctly, you asked whether we believe the Courtauld commitment could be more ambitious in this regard. By way of background information for everyone, the Courtauld commitment is an agreement between the retailers—all of the major supermarkets and brands; there are 31 signatories—to help deliver the designing out of packaging waste growth by this year, and to get absolute reductions by 2010.

[33] The main issue is that packaging has been steadily increasing, pretty much in line with waste, at about 2 per cent a year consistently for the last 10 or 15 years. We agreed with retailers that we would try to stop that happening, so that you would not get this inexorable increase in packaging, and stop that growth. That is even against a backdrop of our living more in single-person households and liking convenience foods—we are one of the major European markets for convenience food. Both those things are driving us towards more packaging.

[34] Therefore, we and the retailers agreed that we would do this; in essence, it is about changing the whole supply chain to stop this process. That is what we hope will be achieved by this year. Was it ambitious? In 2005, I believe that it was extremely ambitious; no country, as far as we are aware—although the Dutch, and others, have tried—have managed to do that. Many people have managed to decouple the growth of packaging from economic growth, but have never got it to stop. What we are trying to do in the Courtauld commitment is to get it to stop and then go down the other way. Was it ambitious enough? Yes, I believe that it was, simply because of the scale of the challenge. These are not just small supply chains—global supply chains are going into our supermarkets, and you cannot change those overnight.

[35] What is fascinating about Courtauld is how retailers have responded to it. As you have probably seen, each retailer who is a signatory has signed up to its own way of doing it. Some have gone for 15 per cent targets, and some have gone for 25 per cent targets; some have applied it to their own packaging, and some have applied it to all packaging. They have also geared up their own teams to deliver it. In 2005, you would struggle to find a company that had a team that was all about packaging optimisation; now you can find them in all the big supermarkets, and they are dedicated to doing this job.

[36] **Ms Milne:** It is a complex and challenging task. We know that it will be difficult to deliver on the objectives that we have set ourselves, which is not to say that we should not go on to look at what else we can do. There is a dilemma about whether you use light-weight packaging materials, and end up using materials that are less recyclable—where does the balance of environmental benefit lie on that? Do you reduce packaging to the point where you increase food waste? Food waste is much more damaging than packaging because it releases methane, which is 23 times more active than carbon dioxide.

[37] Therefore, no-one has the magic formula, or the silver bullet, that will solve this for us. As Richard said, it is good that many of the main supply companies are now engaged in



Courtauld. That will make it much easier to make progress, because there are only so many brand lines on a supermarket shelf—an awful lot of it comes from the Kellogg's and Proctor and Gambles of this world. What we have done with our climate change initiative is try to take the next step and move beyond food into non-food packaging. We have all bought computer games that are tiny items but which come in an enormous box, and that is even harder to influence, because we really are talking about global markets there. We amount to about 2 per cent of the global market. The company making the computer games will not listen to what the UK has to say unless we can get movement on a much broader scale, so that there is European engagement rather than just engagement from the UK.

[38] **Alun Davies:** I will go back to some of the issues that we discussed earlier, such as ambition and behavioural change. I believe that, at the moment, you are looking at reducing the environmental impact of carrier bags by 25 per cent by the end of this year. I appreciate what you have said about the role of plastic bags in a wider environmental argument, and you wish to create behavioural change on several different fronts. However, following on from what Nerys was saying, is 25 per cent the totality of your ambition, or is it the level that you believe is possible?

[39] **Ms Milne:** The original agreement was that there would be a 25 per cent reduction by the end of this year and that we would then sit down again and talk about what more could be done. In fact, since the agreement was reached, the world has moved on, or certainly the debate in the UK has moved on, and in our more recent discussions, both in Westminster and Edinburgh, the emphasis has been less on environmental impacts as measured under the current agreement, and more on reducing the number of bags, because they are a very visible sign. It is quite complex, because some companies have gone down the route of increasing the recycled content in the bags, with some getting up to 100 per cent, while others have gone down the biodegradable route, and others still have gone down a route that mixes in other substances, such as chalk, to bring down the amount of virgin plastic. Again, it is one of these things where you push in on one bit of the balloon and something pops out somewhere else; it is important to understand what we are trying to achieve. If, fundamentally, we are saying that plastic bags are the visible icon of a throwaway society then, quite possibly, it is bag numbers that we need to focus on. That is slightly different to what we started to do 18 months ago, and therefore it will take a little time to adjust some of the measures and see progress in those areas.

[40] **Dr Swannell:** Just to add to that, one of the things that the agreement has done is allow the space for the retailer to try out a lot of different things, and I have brought some examples with me. There are green award points for bringing bags back and carrier-bag-free lanes at the checkout, some supermarkets have taken the carrier bags off the checkout so that you have to ask for them, and other supermarkets ask customers as they go through, 'Have you brought a bag back today?'. Each retailer knows its own consumer base and is trying to work out what works for it. So the 25 per cent target initially allows lots of approaches to be tried to see what works, and then, to echo Jane, the ambition is to go further. Some retailers have already announced that they will go further. It was always intended that achieving a 25 per cent reduction was a first step. The agreement was signed in March 2007, so December 2008 was a challenging deadline by which to get things going. It was intended to get things moving and to get focus, and then we intended to think beyond that about how far we can go.

1.30 p.m.

[41] **Alun Davies:** From the consumer's point of view, this can be hellishly confusing. A plastic bag is not a big part of my life; it helps me get my shopping back on a Monday when we arrive back here. I do not want to think much about it, frankly. I am usually hungry when I am shopping, so I want to go there, do my shopping, come back and cook something, if possible. Am I right in thinking that a lot of people are making this needlessly difficult? We

are talking about the environmental impact of a plastic bag, and I sometimes get the sense that if we cannot fix this, there is little that we can fix. In terms of the Government—you mentioned European law, and this might well be something for Europe—it might be a lot easier on the consumer if it said, ‘By 2010, you will not be able to do this, and you will just have to live with it and get on with it’. The more I hear of this debate, the more I sense that we are making a rod for our own backs, and that we need to set out some clear objectives and the legislative framework for achieving those objectives.

[42] **Ms Milne:** Unfortunately, plastic bags are a big part of my life these days. [*Laughter.*] There is a point of principle here: is it proportionate to use legislation to tackle this particular issue when there are much bigger sustainability issues? There are debates around the Climate Change Bill and so on at the moment and we ought to be focusing our attention on that and using law to drive forward the sort of changes that we need. We need much more investment in infrastructure to enable people to recycle the same materials wherever they happen to live in the UK, and we are looking, with WRAP, at developing a back-of-pack label that will give consumers the kind of information and support that they need to know what they can recycle readily. It seems to me that that is the sort of thing that we ought to be focusing our effort on. By all means, let us have the plastic bag issue as part of an ongoing conversation with our customers, but, as soon as you institute a new law, you have an army of compliance and implementation out there that can take a lot of effort away from other, more important areas.

[43] **Alun Davies:** Tesco and other supermarkets make vast amounts of money, and I sometimes think that they protest too much. If we are unable to deal with this through voluntary methods, or if retailers make life needlessly difficult, I do not see what alternative there is to legislation. You are right to say that we have a whole plethora of other issues; as a committee, we have discussed carbon reduction and all sorts of different policy areas. If we are to achieve all the targets that we have been discussing and which the Climate Change Bill sets out, which are perhaps not ambitious enough, we may be left with little choice but to say to the UK Government and the European Commission that this is the route that we should go down. Even in the current climate, the supermarkets are making vast profits, and if they are not prepared to take action to make it easy for their customers and consumers to resolve this issue, then we will have no alternative but to do that.

[44] **Ms Milne:** There is only one Tesco; there are many retailers that are in a different position. This would impact much more heavily on the small and medium-sized retailers, for example, those in the non-food area or shops in the convenience sector, where you make an impulse purchase and, therefore, do not have your bag with you. Focusing on Tesco does not give the full picture. We feel that it is a bigger debate, and we want to make real inroads into the other parts of that debate.

[45] **Michael German:** I will take short points from Lorraine and Leanne on this, and perhaps Richard can join in with the response. I am sorry, I meant Darren and Leanne.

[46] **Darren Millar:** You caught me off guard there, Chair.

[47] **Michael German:** Me too.

[48] **Darren Miller:** You referred to smaller retailers. The 21 companies that have signed up to the voluntary code do not include small or medium-sized retailers, and it seems to me that they are not engaged in this process in any way, shape or form. If we do not address that side of the coin as well as the larger retailer half of the coin, will we not miss a huge link in the chain in terms of addressing this problem?

[49] **Ms Milne:** First, action is not limited to those retailers who have signed this

particular agreement. For example, the British Retail Consortium has smaller and more specialist trade associations within its membership, such as the Booksellers Association, the National Hardware Federation and so on. I know that many of their members are taking a lot of action. Those retailers are often very much part of their local community and where a community has decided that it wants to become plastic-bag-free, the retailers in those communities are very active as a part of that. So, for example, the Booksellers Association now provides bags for life as part of its support for its members, so there is wider engagement.

[50] **Darren Millar:** What is WRAP doing, Richard, on this front? You are not just talking to the big players; you are talking to everyone, are you not?

[51] **Dr Swannell:** To be fair, the Association of Convenience Stores is a signatory to the current agreement. It is worth bearing in mind that quite a lot of small retailers are already addressing issues, and people who have not signed the agreement are doing things. For example, B&Q is doing things, as are IKEA and Woolworths—they are all doing it—and some of the small companies are also going in for this. One of the key things that the agreement is trying to do is to find a way to make this happen for different types of retailing experiences. The major supermarkets make up the vast bulk in terms of numbers and that is why they were the first people that we wanted to get on board. In terms of numbers, that is where the vast majority is. In fact, you can almost discount the high street compared with the numbers involved there. So, if you want to get numbers, that is where the numbers are. However, if you want to get behavioural change, you need to find out what works. What may work to switch on a reminder in my head that I need to take my bags when I go for my big, weekly shop may be totally different to what will switch on a reminder to take a bag when I go out to lunch in order to carry the lunch that I buy. Those two things are different. We are trying to work out what works for those different things—that is why we are very pleased that Boots is a part of this—and what will make us remember to take our bags back every time we go shopping. I think that it is very helpful that this process is trying to discover what really does work. When that is known, best practice can be shared out across the industry.

[52] **Darren Millar:** Going back to what Alun Davies said, we all use a range of different shops. Is it not the case that the only way that we will really be able to engage every single retailer is through a legislative framework? I do not carry my man bag—for want of a better word—around with me, to every shop that I go to, and it is probably not quite big enough to fit in most of the purchases that I might make, particularly if it is a food purchase. Is that not the only way that we are going to see any real progress on this?

[53] **Dr Swannell:** What is really interesting is that each retailer has found different things that work for its own customer base. With a legislative or regulative approach, it would be a one-size-fits-all solution, offering just one way of addressing this. It may well work and it may well bring about the consequences that you want, but would it engage everyone in the process? This is a behavioural change issue and one of the key things about behavioural change is that it is about really wanting to do it, rather than being made to do it. It may well be that you are right and that that is where it will all end up, but it may be worth while trying to achieve it through behavioural change and encouragement and seeing whether that delivers the outcomes that we all want to see and, if not, we have the legislative approach as a last resort if we need it. That may be one route that we could go down. I have been interested in seeing exactly how many different things are being used. I will give you an example: Waitrose went for green lanes, carrier-bag-free lanes, and, of course, people think, 'Great, it is faster, so I will go down that lane with a big bag'. There is some evidence that that sort of thing does work. Marks & Spencer has tried a charging approach and Asda is trying different approaches. Everybody is trying to find out what will help us to remember to take the bag back whenever we go shopping.

[54] **Leanne Wood:** I want to go back to something that you said earlier about the argument that this is a diversion from making people think about the wider behavioural changes that need to be made. That view was backed up by a professor this week—I am sorry, I do not have his name to hand. I heard this on the radio. He basically said that Government attention in this area is diverting people. It is an easy box for politicians to tick to show that we are doing something for the environment, but it will not actually have the impact that we want. That backs up what you have been saying.

1.40 p.m.

[55] I am also interested in this argument that you put forward that, because of its symbolism, it could trigger further behavioural change, but then you went on to say that that has not happened in Ireland. Can you explain why that has not happened in Ireland? That being the case, can I draw the conclusion from your argument that you think that this is something that we should not be bothering with?

[56] **Ms Milne:** I do not know that a proper study has been done in Ireland, but some of the evidence that has come from the retail sector is that it has not reduced the litter problem as much as was hoped. It has resulted in more purchases of such things as bin liners and nappy bags, which have a much higher plastic content. As an example, if you forget to take your bag for life and buy a new plastic replacement each time you shop, it contains 20 times the plastic of a single use bag, so you have to use it at least 20 times before there is any environmental gain. The focus has been solely on one issue. The debate in the UK focused on a different reason to the concerns in Ireland, which were primarily about litter—they were solving a different problem—and that did not transfer across, because of the over focusing on one aspect.

[57] **Dr Swannell:** I think that the chap to whom you are referring is Chris Coggins. It is a very fair point, and it comes back to the point that we were discussing earlier about whether there is a link here in behavioural change terms. If we remember our bags, will we do other things? The only thing that I can say is that no-one is absolutely certain in this matter. One thing that is clear is that, once people compost at home, for example, they more likely to recycle. If you put in a food waste collection, there is anecdotal evidence to show that the fact that you can see how much food you throw away makes you think, 'Hang on; I'm throwing all that food away', and it starts people thinking about the chain. If you have a food waste collection, that has a positive effect on your attitudes towards recycling. There may be some link, but this science of behavioural change and social marketing is new, and this is all about us trying to adapt to a world dominated by climate change.

[58] You could put the argument the other way. In 2007, we used 12.4 billion bags for the sole purpose of taking our shopping home undamaged—we have to do that; we do not want to damage our shopping. It is much worse if we damage our shopping on the way home, so you have to do it—let us be clear about that. Then again, could we get away with a lot less? I think that the answer is 'yes'. If we get into the habit of remembering our bags, it is worthwhile testing whether that then leads us to do other things as well. It is worthwhile saying, however, that the Irish experience is not a good example of doing that, because they did not do it for the same reasons, as Jane explained.

[59] **Lorraine Barrett:** You just mentioned the 12.4 billion bags. The 25 per cent reduction target could leave us with more than 10 billion. Do you think that 10 billion bags circulating in the waste stream is an appropriate number for the longer term? Why 10 billion? I know that that represents the 25 per cent reduction, but is that appropriate? Should we be going for something else?

[60] **Dr Swannell:** Speaking on behalf of WRAP, we always saw 25 per cent as a start. It

is rather like the discussion that we had on the commitment to design out packaging waste growth by 2008 as a start. It is about taking it further than that, which is one of the reasons why the target was relatively short in the future. One of the issues in March 2007 when this was negotiated, I understand, is that it was difficult at that stage to have an idea of what the target should be, because no-one had tried to do this through a voluntary approach. We were not sure how effective it could be. It is interesting now that some of the major supermarkets have already announced targets that go well beyond 25 per cent, and their experience in going through this process tells them that they can do 50 per cent, and some have already announced that as a target. Our view is that this is a part of a process that is going much further, and 25 per cent is not the stopping point. We are all clear that we want the outcome of much less plastic being used, and if we can get into the habit of not having a bag every time that we buy a sandwich, that would be good.

[61] **Lorraine Barrett:** What do you consider could be achievable by 2010?

[62] **Ms Milne:** I think that part of this is trying to ensure that something that is different to what happens now is seen as normal behaviour. If we are successful in reaching the 50 per cent figure through these means, which, as Richard said, is what a number of supermarkets have done—Marks and Spencer thinks that it might get as far as 70 per cent with its approach—you start to have a ripple-out effect that could bring more people in. So, it could go very much further, but we need to get to some sort of tipping point first. I do not think that anyone is quite sure where that is and at what point we will go over that. In 18 months' time, we will be in a very different place.

[63] Another point that I wish to raise is that some consumer research has been done in the European Union, but also elsewhere, that has shown that, on issues like this, using voluntary measures and encouraging and rewarding good behaviour has far more of an impact on consumers than penalising them for doing the wrong thing. Given that the climate change and sustainability debate will mean that we will all be faced with some choices that we do not want to make, it would seem counter-productive to put people's backs up and get them into the wrong place psychologically on something such as a carrier bag, when it could mean making 20 per cent less use of your car, or whatever.

[64] **Lorraine Barrett:** We have mentioned some of the bigger retailers, but I thought that I would mention the Co-op. When I was in my local Co-op the other night, I took a plastic bag—I put my hands up and confess that I do use them—but it said on it that, within 18 months, it would biodegrade. [*Laughter.*] It said on the bag that, from the minute of its manufacture, it would biodegrade within 18 months. Do you have any comments on that as a possible alternative? I am not quite sure what happens when it biodegrades.

[65] **Dr Swannell:** The Co-op has used a number of different approaches; it has been quite innovative in trying things. For example, it has a Fair Trade cotton bag, as you are probably aware. The biodegradable issue, and this is a slightly technical argument, means that you can put it in your home compost bin, or you can put it in the compost stream and it will completely disappear. All you are doing there is dealing with the end of life. I think that what the Co-op wants is for people to reuse that bag as much as possible and then pop it in a compost bin at the end of its life. That is the sort of thing that it is thinking about, rather than say, 'Use it once, and you can salve your conscience by chucking it in the compost bin', or, 'It is biodegradable—I do not need to worry about it'. We need to be clear that the best thing that you can do with a bag is to reuse it as many times as you can, and at end of life, you have an option of recycling it—many bags are now 100 per cent recyclable and many bags for life have 100 per cent recyclable content—which is one option; another option is that you can put it in your compost bin, provided that it is home compostable, and I know that the Co-op has worked hard to try to make that happen.

[66] **Alun Davies:** I wish to come back on something that you said in answer to a previous question about consumer research in Europe demonstrating that consumers are more likely to respond better to rewards for good behaviour rather than penalties for poor behaviour. I think that you are probably right on the consumer behaviour—I would probably agree with that. However, in terms of business and retailers, I am not so sure that that is correct, because in many cases, across the whole field of policy, it is often only when the threat of legislation appears—in this case it might be retailers; in other cases it could be other businesses—will change their behaviour because of the penalties for not doing so. So, I think that there is a difference between the policy framework in which businesses might operate and the legal framework in which a consumer might operate.

[67] **Ms Milne:** That is true in situations where the market results in big disadvantages for a first mover, but on environmental issues, the brand value attached to being seen as a responsible corporate citizen is such that, in fact, most big retailers have active programmes in the sustainability sphere. So, I am not sure that that holds in this area.

1.50 p.m.

[68] **Michael German:** You are introducing a very interesting line of debate that we could possibly follow up in other evidence.

[69] **Lesley Griffiths:** I would like to go back to looking at the reduction of the environmental impact of plastic bags. In your paper, Jane, you stated that you believed in a voluntary approach and public engagement and you said that the tipping point of consumer behaviour would have more of an impact than introducing a levy. However, when they introduced a levy in Ireland, there was a 90 per cent reduction in the environmental impact of plastic bags. Why do you think that it would be better to use a voluntary approach?

[70] **Ms Milne:** I am not sure that there has been a 90 per cent reduction in the environmental impact generally; there has been a 90 per cent reduction specifically in plastic bags. That is the difference. We think that, in the end, we will get to where we want to reach more quickly by going a bit slower at the moment—by getting people to buy in rather than forcing them to do something on a policing basis. We will, therefore, avoid some of the unintended consequences that came out of the Irish approach.

[71] **Lesley Griffiths:** You mentioned before—[*Inaudible.*]

[72] **Dr Swannell:** I think so. From the environmental perspective, the other point is that singling out plastic bags rather than all bags may have a bigger impact on the environment. The behavioural change that we are after here is remembering to reuse our bags, which is what we used to do; we need to target all bags if we are going to do anything at all. Part of what we are hearing is that there is a will in the industry to try to do this. It may be that, in a year's time, we all sit around this table having achieved a 35 per cent reduction, and we may all think that that is not good enough. That is fine, but I think that there is now an aspiration to go much further with this and, if that works, it might work better with the grain of the audience to encourage all of us to make a change, rather than saying, 'Right, from now on, you have to do it this way'.

[73] **Michael German:** Darren has a question that he was going to ask later, but as you have raised the issue, it might be a good time for him to ask it.

[74] **Darren Millar:** Before I ask my question on the voluntary approach and at which point we should say that it has failed and move in a legislative direction, we have talked about a levy, and Lesley asked whether a levy was more effective. Given that Marks and Spencer has, effectively, volunteered to charge a levy on plastic bags and that it appears to be the

retailer having the most success in reducing the number of carrier bags used by its customer base, does that not tell you immediately that a levy is the obvious route to take?

[75] **Ms Milne:** Marks and Spencer did some careful trialling with its customer base before reaching that conclusion and it is applying it in the food part of its business and not in the clothing part. So, it has targeted how it has looked at this.

[76] Other retailers have decided that, for their customers, a different approach is more productive—

[77] **Darren Millar:** However, other retailers have not tried a levy.

[78] **Ms Milne:** No, but they are trying other measures and getting good results.

[79] **Darren Millar:** So, how can they say that a levy is not going to be effective for their customer base if they have not tried a levy?

[80] **Ms Milne:** Mainly because they want to engage their customers positively on this. That is their call in terms of how they want their brand to interact with their customers.

[81] **Darren Millar:** I suppose the word ‘levy’ has negative connotations. Effectively it is a compulsory charge for a plastic carrier bag. Given the evidence from Marks and Spencer, I would say that its customer base might be the least prepared to engage in environmental issues—I might be stereotyping there, but they could possibly be—and if Marks and Spencer has seen the most significant reduction, surely that suggests that a charge or levy on a plastic bag will be the most effective approach. However, you have already given me an answer on that.

[82] On the voluntary approach, what sort of timescale will you pin on that if it is not successful in achieving a 25 per cent reduction in the environmental impact of plastic bags by the end of 2008? That is by no means clear at the moment. Will you say, ‘Right, this is a failure, so let us progress the legislative programme’? In your paper, Richard, you have boasted that there has been a 14 per cent reduction in the environmental impact through the reduction in the use of virgin plastic, but how is that being policed? How do you know that that is definitely the case? The number of bags in circulation might have gone down by 1 billion among those retailers that are involved in the scheme, which is progress, but it still represents only around 8 per cent or less of the bags that they are using, does it not?

[83] **Dr Swannell:** To be clear, we are not boasting about either of those things; we are trying to report the data factually. WRAP’s role is purely to report the data factually. We get the data from the retailers, we check that they make sense, and we report them collectively. All we have done is what the agreement said it would do, namely monitor the total number of bags that have been reduced, and we have faithfully reported that, along with the environmental impact, which was the original agreement. The best proxy that we have for that is the reduction in the virgin use of plastic. The reason that we chose that is that 98.2 per cent of all carrier bags that are issued are made of plastic. That is why we went down that road. We have said publicly that there may be better ways of doing this. The Environment Agency is doing a life-cycle assessment at the moment, analysing different carrier bags, and that should give us information that we can turn into carbon-dioxide profiling, should we wish to do so. One thing that Jane and others have already said—and we also said it at the time—is that the focus is increasingly on a reduction in bags anyway. One of the best ways to hit the 25 per cent target is to reduce the number of bags used full stop.

[84] Coming back to your main point, all we did in February was assess whether this was broadly on track to hit the target, as it was the halfway point between signing the agreement

in March 2007 and the target date of the end of 2008. It looks to us as though the signatories are at least halfway towards meeting the target, and perhaps slightly over, so it looks like they will deliver it. Is there stuff going on in-store? Yes.

[85] **Darren Millar:** I—

[86] **Michael German:** Hang on, Darren; otherwise, Leanne will not be able to ask her questions.

[87] **Darren Millar:** I appreciate that, but I would like to—

[88] **Michael German:** I know, but we will not have time and Leanne has a question. Can you store it and we will come back to it at the end if we have time?

[89] **Darren Millar:** I will have a chat with you later, Richard.

[90] **Leanne Wood:** Thank you. We are running out of time. In your report, you say that, unless the underlying customer behaviour is addressed, a ban on plastic bags will simply result in their replacement by paper carriers. However, the evidence from Ireland is that plastic bags were substituted for paper carriers in less than 1 per cent of shopping transactions. How can you reconcile those two statements?

[91] **Ms Milne:** There is a lot of confusion about exactly what those figures in Ireland represent. I have found it impossible to get a full analysis of exactly what happened. A lot of anecdotal evidence has come from Ireland. We have heard of substitutions with all sorts of things, including people using black bin-bags instead, so there have been all sorts of peculiar behaviours. However, that move did not transfer to people's behaviour on other issues. That is the point for us. If we can make the connection to other sustainability issues, this will be an adequate symbol for sustainability. If all we do is address one particular symptom, we will not have made any progress.

[92] **Leanne Wood:** Thank you for that. My final question is to WRAP. You list 21 organisations involved in your organisational agreement, but there are some notable exceptions, including one of the major supermarket retailers. Can you tell us what work is being done to ensure that all large retailers are brought into the terms of this commitment?

2.00 p.m.

[93] **Dr Swannell:** I am just trying to think which particular one you think is absent. My understanding is that all the main supermarkets are involved in the agreement, unless we have missed one out on our list. These 21 organisations are responsible, as far as we can work out, for the vast bulk of all of the carrier bags that are used in the UK. It includes Asda, Morrisons, the Co-operative, Boots—

[94] **Leanne Wood:** They are all involved in it, are they, including Asda?

[95] **Dr Swannell:** Asda is there. If I have inadvertently left someone off the list, I apologise. Asda is definitely a signatory.

[96] **Michael German:** I am going to conclude there, because we have almost reached the end of our time and I have to make some announcements to the committee. You have provoked some detailed questioning from Members. We may well write to you with further questions to get more evidence on the record, if we may, to supplement what you have said today, because you have raised some pretty substantial issues and we are deeply grateful for that.



[97] Following Leanne's question, we want to see the impact of the ban in the Republic of Ireland, and I propose that we take evidence from Government and other agencies and bodies in Dublin on 14 July. Are Members happy with that? I see that you are, so we can ask the Business Committee for the right to do that. We will try to use the most sustainable method of transportation to get us to that meeting.

[98] As requested, I met with the Minister to discuss the position regarding the legislative competence Order, which would transfer powers to us in this area. There is some overlap with the work that is being done on the draft Marine Bill. By good fortune, the Minister will be here at our next meeting, which is on 4 June, to give evidence on the draft Marine Bill, and she will write to us in advance of that meeting giving us the latest position on the LCO. I suggest that we ask her questions on that matter, on the basis of her letter, while she is at that stage.

[99] I also asked whether she felt that we should proceed with this current study, given the lack of clarity around our powers, and I felt that the confidence with which she replied 'yes' was a good indication that we should continue with that work. So, I propose that we continue with the study on banning plastic bags. We may need to probe some issues during the course of the study. The voluntary versus compulsory approach would be the first one, and the methods of raising levies, imposing a ban or effecting a reduction in the use of plastic bags are a sub-set of that. Perhaps the first thing to consider is their impact on the environment, and perhaps we should take evidence on that with regard to production, usage and the waste stream. We will need to consider the scope, which we have raised today, and whether this should relate to all bags or just some bags. We may need some papers to help us to understand the science behind all this and the legislative competence. I will suggest to the clerk that we take forward the study in those directions, but, if Members have any other views, please let Virginia know.

[100] I will now close the meeting. The next meeting will be on Wednesday, 4 June, when we will take evidence from the Minister on fuel poverty and the draft Marine Bill. Thank you, colleagues and witnesses.

*Daeth y cyfarfod i ben am 2.03 p.m.  
The meeting ended at 2.03 p.m.*