



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Agriculture, Environment and
Rural Affairs

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Waste Management Strategy 2015-2020:
Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural
Affairs, Northern Ireland Environment Agency

17 November 2016

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Ms Linda Dillon (Chairperson)
Ms Caoimhe Archibald (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Sydney Anderson
Mr David Ford
Mr William Irwin
Mr Patsy McGlone
Mr Harold McKee
Mr Oliver McMullan
Mr Edwin Poots
Mr Robin Swann

Witnesses:

Mr William Dukelow	Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs
Mr Tim Irwin	Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs
Mr John Mills	Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs
Mr Derek Williamson	Northern Ireland Environment Agency

The Chairperson (Ms Dillon): I welcome John Mills, the director of the environmental policy division in the Department; Tim Irwin from the environmental policy division in the Department; Derek Williamson from the NIEA controls and operations unit; and William Dukelow from the waste strategy division in the Department. Thank you very much for coming along to give us a presentation. I ask that you keep your presentation as brief as possible to allow members as long as possible to ask questions.

I remind members that we are going to Derry for a meeting next Thursday, and we will deal specifically with the waste crime element of waste; we will get an opportunity to discuss that next week. I ask that we stick to the rest of the stuff on the waste strategy rather than taking up this meeting with something that is going to be discussed next week anyhow. Please go ahead with your presentation.

Mr John Mills (Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs): Thank you, Chair. It is a broad subject, but I will try to work through it. You already covered one point I wanted to make, which is that you will get a briefing on waste crime next week. I will not talk about that. Hopefully, you have slides in front of you. We printed out slides, and I intend to speak to them.

Turning to the first slide, the legal context for waste is set out at the EU-level by the waste framework directive and a number of others on landfill and producer responsibility. Amongst other things, those define terms that are used in waste, set out principles and give targets to member states. Much of that has been transposed into Northern Ireland law by the Waste and Contaminated Land Order (Northern Ireland) 1997. Amongst other things, that requires DAERA to produce a waste management strategy.

Turning to the next slide, the current waste management strategy was published in 2013 and is called 'Delivering Resource Efficiency'. The emphasis was on treating waste as a resource with value rather than as something to be thrown away. It particularly established the concept of a waste hierarchy as the guiding principle. The next slide shows that hierarchy, which, if you like, sets the order of merit for dealing with waste. The top of the inverted pyramid on that slide shows that the best way to deal with waste is not to make it in the first place through prevention and things like the carrier bag levy. Failing that, reuse followed by recycling are the best approaches, and, if that is not possible, recovery of energy is the next best, followed by disposal to landfill. Of course, the organised disposal of waste to landfill is better than illegal dumping. All those have a part to play in dealing with waste in Northern Ireland at the moment.

The next slide shows a pie chart that gives a picture for waste in Northern Ireland. Northern Ireland produces around 6 million tons of waste per annum. As you can see from the green segment of the pie chart, the majority of waste by weight comes from construction, demolition and excavation. That is principally inert waste, and the recycling of those materials, as well as the industrial and commercial waste, in the construction sector is comparatively high and largely driven by landfill tax. We tend to concentrate on local authority-collected municipal waste, which is shown in the purple bit of the pie chart. That includes household waste — the stuff in people's bins and so on.

The next slide shows what happens to the waste. Of about a million tons of municipal waste, just over 40% is sent to landfill, another 40% is recycled and 15%, the majority of the rest, is exported as refuse-derived fuel for energy recovery. The next slide concentrates on the recycling segment. It shows what is recycled, and the pie chart shows the breakdown of that. Getting on for half is biodegradable garden and food waste, and paper is also a sizeable contributor. Other significant areas are glass and plastics. The value of the recycled material varies according to world markets and quality. Metals, glass, plastics, paper and cardboard can all earn an income.

The next slide shows who does what. The DAERA core division, which includes my division, is responsible for strategy, policy and legislation. Local authorities are the deliverers of the service and are responsible for waste collection. The Environment Agency regulates and enforces environmental compliance. The private sector also deals with commercial and industrial waste. Finally, it is worth mentioning the Waste and Resources Action Programme (WRAP), which is a non-profit recycling advocate that advises government on recycling.

Turning to the next slide, the Committee asked for information on costs. In trying to give the overall picture, I will say that local government spend is around £165 million per annum according to the latest audit report. That is something like a quarter of councils' total spend. I am not sure that we have an overall cost for waste management for the business sector, but landfill tax is £82 a ton, and adding gate fees to that takes us to about £100 per ton for landfill costs. The entire AERA Department, including the agency, spends £11 million on waste. The majority of those costs are with the agency for regulation and enforcement. Given that the total environmental budget is around £60 million, £11 million is a significant portion of it.

The next slide shows in a little more detail the funding by the core Department as opposed to the agency. The top figures show cumulative spend, and the bottom set of figures show spend this year. In the current year, resource spending is just over half a million pounds, covering information campaigns, support for WRAP and research. Capital spending is £2.5 million through the Rethink Waste programme, which is to support local government infrastructure.

Moving from the costs to the trends, the graph on the next slide shows three lines. The red line is landfill, which has reduced significantly over the last decade, the blue line is recycling, which has increased significantly, and the green line at the bottom is waste exported for energy recovery, which has also risen. The fall in landfill and the increase in recycling are desirable policy outcomes.

The next slide shows the EU-derived targets for waste and progress against them. The main targets are to recycle 50% of household waste by 2020 and for landfill to be no more than 35% of 1995 levels of biodegradable municipal waste by 2020. The 2020 recycling target is also reflected in the

Programme for Government (PFG). There are other targets on things like non-hazardous construction and demolition waste, and packaging. The landfill target is on track to be met, and we are currently at around 43% on recycling.

The next slide shows the challenges for the future. Despite the success in increasing recycling and reducing landfill, a number of challenges remain. Those are listed on the slide. I will very quickly run through the next handful of slides. The first concerns the increase in council municipal waste. If there is more waste to deal with, that is one of the challenges. That is largely dependent on increasing population and overall economic activity. The graph shows that municipal waste, after going down over the past few years, is increasing. The next slide shows where we have our landfill in Northern Ireland. Our remaining capacity exceeds 7 million tons, but during 2015 we landfilled 700,000 tons, so it is not difficult to work out that our remaining capacity would last 10 years. It takes a long time to open new landfill sites, and seven out of 11 councils identified landfill as a risk. The next slide shows the increase there has been in recycling over the last few years. It has hit something of a plateau at around 40% across various jurisdictions. That suggests that extra impetus is needed to take it further. Our final graph shows the export of refuse-derived fuel. That is relatively high risk, as prices are volatile for the cost of exporting the fuel and there is the prospect of greater competition in Europe if the EU adopts higher targets. It is also undesirable in the context of the proximity principle, which says you should dispose of waste nearest to home.

Finally, on the challenges, it is worth mentioning the circular economy package that is before Europe. That is looking at higher targets for recycling and landfill.

What is the possible response? Over recent months, representatives in local and central government have proposed a draft outline action plan for achieving the 2020 targets and preparing to meet possible future needs. That represents a partnership approach between central and local government to deliver improved waste management as set out in the bullet points in the slide: minimising waste; achieving the higher recycling targets; maximising recovery in Northern Ireland; and ensuring sufficient landfill capacity. Added to that are a couple of general supporting measures, like procurement and governance. The Minister is considering the action plan and is keen to hear the Committee's views.

Thank you very much.

The Chairperson (Ms Dillon): I appreciate your presentation; thank you. Thank you for keeping it brief, because I am sure members will have a number of questions. Again, I will ask members to be as brief as possible with their questions, although I know that is not always possible, because you want to get to the bottom of the information.

I have a quick question. The target for recycling is 50%: will we meet that? If we are going to meet it, how? You said that the recycling has plateaued. What is the plan? How will we meet that?

Mr Mills: As you rightly say, it is plateauing. The consensus is that, if nothing is done, it will be very challenging to meet those targets. Hence, at the end, the local government and central government approach is to try to devise an action plan — it is an annex, if you like, or an addition to the existing strategy — to try to give it a boost. The various measures for boosting recycling will be set out in that and will include an information campaign to bolster the changes in food waste regulations, for example, which are designed to cause the separate collection of food waste. They will also be looking at the optimal way of collecting waste and at a gap study on what it would take to hit the 50%. That action plan, which is like an annex to the existing strategy, is being proposed as the way forward, and, as I said, the Minister is considering that.

The Chairperson (Ms Dillon): Some councils are doing very good work on recycling stuff that comes in, particularly through the recycle and reuse strategy. I understand the reasons for not allowing people to do some things. There was a stage when people were able to go into the local dumps and take stuff out. Very, very good stuff is being dumped; I see it all the time. I am thinking of an overall directive or of taking best practice from the council that is doing that best and trying to direct other councils to do the same thing. I think there is not enough leadership on that issue. We are sending stuff to landfill that does not need to be there and that people could make very good use of. I am not saying that would have a massive impact on the targets, but it is something worth looking at because it would help on both sides. There is a social element to it, but there is also another side.

Very quickly, you said that you do not focus on the landfill tax side of things and that your focus is on the municipal aspects. I spoke to members about this before the meeting this morning. It has been

raised with me that there should be more cross-departmental work going on. Even if we cannot tackle this in a big way in the private sector, we have massive projects happening within government. I am talking about the building of roads, for example, where we send soil to landfill. One company I met is crying out for that soil to make peat for growing mushrooms, but because there is not good enough cross-departmental working, the company is not getting the time to remove it. It needs a certain length of time to remove it and make sure that everything is done in the proper way because, after all, it is going to be used in food production. We are with a Department that has the agri-food sector at its heart, and it also has the environmental aspect. This is a brilliant opportunity. One particular project that will be happening in infrastructure will send soil to landfill at a cost of tens of millions of pounds. Landfill will add those millions to the cost of the project. That soil might be of use to that company, but it is not getting the time.

There needs to be more cross-departmental work on that, because it meets our purpose at every level. If we could arrange that, we would be saving the Government money, reusing the soil and assisting our agri-food sector. Mushroom companies are under severe pressure, and there is real lack of this casing for growing mushrooms. That is something we definitely need to be looking at going into the future. If we cannot do it at that cross-departmental level, how will we ever tackle some of the stuff that goes on in the private sector? It is extremely important that we have a bit of a focus on this. I do not know whether we will be able to have the strategy we would want with all the elements of private sector construction, but at the very least we should look to do the cross-departmental stuff.

I want to allow members to ask questions; I am not even asking for a response on that, but I really think it is something that should be brought back to the Department and the Minister to look at.

Mr Poots: What is the difference between the best council and the worst council in recycling?

Mr Tim Irwin (Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs): For the best council, it is at about 60%, and the worst is at 29%.

Mr Poots: The obvious question is this: why do we tolerate the 29%? Why are we talking about plateaus, when councils can achieve twice as much? I suspect the worst council is the largest.

Mr Mills: I do not know. The only thing I would say about some of those figures is that some councils have very high composting levels, so that flat figure is not necessarily the most accurate guide. Certainly, in the action plan that has been proposed, there are proposals to look at a consistency charter, for example, to get more consistency across the councils.

Mr Poots: The thing is that we are referring to plateaus; we have not reached one if there are councils that are recycling half as much as others. There is obviously a lot more that can be achieved.

Mr T Irwin: The worst council is not the biggest, and the best is not the biggest. In the recycling rates, there are differences between urban, rural and suburban areas, and different methods of collection are used by the councils. All those impact on the amount of waste recycled. Other factors are the behaviour of householders and the need for communication about what can and cannot be recycled in line with council methods.

Mr Poots: OK. I am not against consideration of energy recovery, but I am against wasting money. Can you tell me how much the proposed Arc21 incinerator is going to cost in capital and what its annual running costs are? How much material is it proposed it will deal with?

Mr T Irwin: The capital cost will be determined by the procurement exercise, which will also determine the cost to the councils.

Mr Poots: They have an estimate.

Mr T Irwin: That is the councils' procurement, not the Department's.

Mr Poots: I know, but is it not around £240 million or something like that?

Mr T Irwin: I am not sure of the actual figure.

Mr Mills: It would be in that region for an infrastructural —

Mr Poots: What are the running costs estimated to be?

Mr T Irwin: That would be down to the final business case.

Mr Poots: Are they not looking for money off the Department as well? Has the Department not underwritten it?

Mr T Irwin: The proposals for the waste management groups were about looking for support through financial transactions capital (FTC) as a loan to the council, sponsored by the relevant Department. They were also seeking Executive agreement for support to other councils if the facility turned out to be more expensive in the short term.

Mr Poots: Perhaps you could get us the figures for a future Committee meeting so that we can consider that. We are looking at £82 a ton for landfill, for example, through tax. You said it came up to around £100, I think, for overall costs, so it is about £18 a ton to deal with that waste. I would like to know how much it would cost to incinerate and whether it would deliver value for money or whether you should look at other routes. As I said, I am not against incineration, but the technology is old. I know that the incinerator they are using has modern incinerator technology, but a whole range of other technologies have become available for waste in the intervening period.

Mr Mills: I would have to say that, of course, there is a process ongoing through the Planning Appeals Commission to determine issues. It may need to make a recommendation to the Infrastructure Minister, who will make a call on planning. That is the process we are in at the moment. The procurers, Arc21, will be able to say only at that point what the figures are.

Mr Poots: Just finally, Chair, you raised the issue of money being wasted. I am aware that, in years gone by, although I am not sure whether this is still the case, material from Northern Ireland Water — sewage waste, basically, that had been treated and sanitised and so forth — was taken to facilities in Northern Ireland and put into large trenches, and willows and so forth were grown from it. It was used for generating energy. For some reason, NIEA stopped that, and instead of being disposed of here, it was taken to England to be disposed of at massive cost both for haulage and the disposal. It strikes me that this is an EU issue, because if it can be disposed of in the United Kingdom it is still within the European Union at this stage. We need to look further at things like that because that strikes me as squandering money from Northern Ireland. You are shaking your head, so you can respond if you wish.

Mr T Irwin: I do not think the agency has ruled out the use of sewage sludge; it just requires a licence to operate by that method.

Mr Mills: My recollection was that there was some going, but it was limited. Ultimately, this is a matter for Northern Ireland Water, which has a public-private partnership contract for the disposal of all its sewage sludge now. It is all disposed of through incineration down in Duncrue estate.

The Chairperson (Ms Dillon): It was an NIEA issue that was causing difficulties for the company I met as well.

Mr McGlone: Thank you. I am looking through your document, and I see there are references to waste crime and illegal waste etc. Where does hazardous waste fit into this?

Mr William Dukelow (Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs): Maybe I can cover that. There have not really been any major reports of illegal activity with hazardous waste.

Mr McGlone: Reports are one thing, but the strategy for dealing with hazardous waste should presumably be incorporated here.

Mr Dukelow: The agency and the core Department are working together to develop a policy position statement on hazardous waste. That is one of the actions in the current waste strategy. That is expected shortly. It will set out the correct methods for the management of hazardous waste.

Mr McGlone: Will it define what hazardous waste is? Or should I ask how you define hazardous waste?

Mr Dukelow: Hazardous waste is defined technically. I am not sure of the exact technical definition, but it is definitively defined.

Mr McGlone: Yes, but will it be incorporated as part of this, or are you waiting for a statement on it?

Mr Dukelow: As part of?

Mr McGlone: As part of the strategy you are beginning to outline here.

Mr Dukelow: With local government? The action plan with local government?

Mr McGlone: Or indeed regionally.

Mr Dukelow: It is not specifically part of that strategy going forward. Hazardous waste is a very small proportion of waste and is generally managed very efficiently.

Mr Mills: I think that, in general terms, we agree with your point that hazardous waste should be in any overall approach. In the original strategy, there are references to hazardous waste. The actual work stream might be outside the action plan, but, as William said, there is an ongoing work stream there. We agree that it is not a separate issue.

Mr McGlone: Will it be incorporated into any other future strategies? Maybe I am pre-empting what the statement itself will be. What is the statement? Is it to outline the —

Mr Dukelow: The policy position statement would outline the correct methodology for the management of hazardous waste. Frankly, there have not really been any difficulties with the management of hazardous waste in Northern Ireland that have come to light.

Mr Derek Williamson (Northern Ireland Environment Agency): I can say that, operationally, we deal with about 28,500 hazardous waste consignment notes a year. Again, operationally, there are systems and controls for the movements of hazardous waste. William is right in saying that — this is from my point of view, because I manage this on an operational level — we do not see hazardous waste as a significant element of the waste problems, waste streams or waste crime in particular. The control, regulation and management of hazardous waste seem to be working reasonably well.

Mr McGlone: Finally, just leading on from the previous point we had with the researcher, where does that hazardous waste go? What are its usual destinations?

Mr Williamson: Most hazardous waste is dealt with locally, but that which we export probably ends up in places like China and Indonesia. You will probably hear in a presentation I will do next week on waste crime exactly where we export waste. We will talk about hazardous waste during that.

Mr McGlone: OK; I do not want to pre-empt what you will say next week.

Ms Archibald: I have just a couple of wee questions. I will put them all out there and you can pick them up. With regard to the strategies and programmes that are in place, we have the waste prevention programme, the Road to Zero Waste, but we do not have any set targets specifically for when we aim to achieve that zero waste. What happens to food waste after it has been separated? Is it composted? Is it processed by anaerobic digestion? How is it treated? After things are separated into different streams for recycling, what then happens to those different streams? Where do they go? In order to achieve better recycling targets, is investment needed in infrastructure?

Mr Mills: I think I got four questions there. It would be wrong to say that we have a target for zero waste meaning literally no waste: "zero waste" means that you make the most of what you can make something of. We argue that, if you think of that waste hierarchy, although you would much prefer to, say, recycle than landfill or incinerate, there would still be a place for landfill or energy recovery in any programme. Zero waste is about minimising waste. Certainly, a refresh of the zero waste strategy is

recommended as one of the actions in the action plan that we have talked about, and there is the possibility of looking at waste prevention programmes for councils.

On where the recycling streams go, we have, for example, at least three large-ish businesses in Northern Ireland for plastics, cardboard and paper, and glass. They take a fair amount of the stuff that is recycled. I think we also have a big composting contractor. Is investment needed in further council infrastructure? Yes, that is a good point. This year, we are making £2.5 million available through the Rethink Waste programme to support councils.

Mr Dukelow: Could I pick up on what happens to food waste? The food waste regulations will mean there will be a much greater volume of food waste available to councils. The routes that can be used at present are anaerobic digestion and in-vessel composting. Anaerobic digestion is the preferred option for the Department because it produces energy and heat as well as digestate.

Food waste is particularly suitable for anaerobic digestion. The fact that we have been consulting on food waste regulations for some time and have had them in place since 2015 has meant that the private sector anaerobic digestion industry has had an impetus. We have seen facilities established across Northern Ireland and we hope that they will prosper with the increased tonnage of food waste in the years to come.

Ms Archibald: Do we have enough anaerobic digestion infrastructure in place to pick up on the food waste that will be coming from councils?

Mr Dukelow: Obviously, to some extent these are commercial decisions. It does not take quite as long for an anaerobic digestion plant to get up and running as it would do for other waste infrastructure. I think that there would be sufficient capacity for the food waste that is produced at the moment. The projections are that an additional 58,000 tons of food waste should be produced in the next year or so as a result of the regulations when they are finally implemented by April next year.

Ms Archibald: Do some recycle streams end up in landfill?

Mr T Irwin: The good quality recyclates, as John said, go to places like Huhtamaki, which turns cardboard into egg boxes and exports them around the world. With plastics, companies like Cherry Polymers make drainpipes and guttering. As far as glass goes, there is a range of uses, from decorative glass to aggregates. Where there is contamination of some recyclates, that material is returned and is not usable. That is why the separate collection helps to improve the quality of the materials.

Mr Dukelow: There is a ban on landfilling separately collected food waste.

Mr McMullan: Thank you for your presentation. What are your views on the single waste authority?

Mr Mills: My view, as the Minister is considering, is that that issue is raised in the action plan. That is a matter for councils to decide for themselves, if that is the preferred direction.

Mr T Irwin: There are some benefits in having a single waste authority regarding consistency of approach, economies of scale and procurement. As John said, it is a council decision as to whether a single waste authority is the way forward for them. It is part of the discussions in the action plan.

Mr Mills: Regardless of the structure, it is recognised that a consistent approach, whether you have one authority or not, is a desirable outcome.

Mr McMullan: Have we put on paper the possible benefits of a single waste authority to councils?

Mr Mills: Looking at that is part of the action plan.

Mr McMullan: But there is nothing in there to tell the layman, if he looked at that, what the benefits are. Is there anywhere a layman can look and see the benefits of a single waste authority?

Mr T Irwin: The single waste authority has been doing the rounds for quite a number of years.

Mr McMullan: Since 2009, but we still do not have anything on paper. That is what I am trying to tease out of you. Is there anything on paper anywhere outlining the benefits of a single waste authority?

Mr T Irwin: Part of the work on the gap analysis identifying what wastes there are, how they might be dealt with, and the governance arrangements around all of that might help to inform whether a single waste authority is beneficial for councils.

Mr McMullan: I am lost on that.

Mr T Irwin: On the single waste authority, we are talking about the need for consistency of approach so that people know exactly what should go in which bin, and about the collection systems. All of that is being looked at as part of a study into what is best practice elsewhere and what might fit in with other councils. All of that will be gathered together to see whether a single waste authority could produce benefits.

Mr McMullan: That is grand; thank you. That would mean that we would be looking at the waste programme board, which is there to advise. Am I correct?

Mr T Irwin: Yes, we are reviewing the whole governance structure to look at how all of this will be taken forward.

Mr McMullan: Will there be savings in that as well?

Mr T Irwin: In terms of what?

Mr McMullan: Administration etc.

Mr T Irwin: Yes, we will seek to reduce the bureaucracy around all the governance arrangements and make it more fit for purpose and aligned with whatever comes out of the action plan.

Mr McMullan: I want to go back to what Caoimhe was saying about anaerobic digesters. What discussions have you had with the agriculture sector on anaerobic digesters? A number of those are already working and quite a lot of the farming community delivers to them. Have we discussed with them how we can use waste food for anaerobic digesters?

Mr T Irwin: We have discussed anaerobic digesters for agricultural slurries and wastes regarding the likes of the climate change side of things. I think that there is possibly a concern about bringing other products on to a farm and bringing food waste in from other sources. I am not sure whether that would be an appropriate way forward.

Mr McMullan: Have you looked at the French model?

Mr T Irwin: I have not.

Mr McMullan: No?

Mr Mills: I am not aware of any adoption of a French model or —

Mr McMullan: The French Government brought in new stuff on food waste etc and digestion.

Mr Mills: Yes, on food waste, action has been taken to introduce regulations, which have been enacted and are in the process of being implemented. The final implementation will be April next year. That was driven by the EU, so it will be European-wide.

Mr McMullan: Is that food waste to energy?

Mr Mills: It is largely about the separation of food waste. It is separated from compost and so on. Food waste has a much higher calorific value; it is much more efficient for energy recovery through anaerobic digestion, as William said.

Mr McMullan: I do not want to go on for too long, but have we done a lot of work, or any work, on food waste to energy and anaerobic digestion? If there is something about bringing food on to a farm, there is legislation; you can do that. Have we looked at that?

Mr Mills: We, in the sense of government, do not have a plan or approach to separate food waste and build an anaerobic digester or infrastructure to use it. Through the Northern Ireland renewables obligation (NIRO), Northern Ireland is part of the UK scheme to incentivise renewable energy. That will include support through renewables obligation certificates (ROCs) to people who build anaerobic digesters. The scheme will end in 2017. This is principally how government incentivises people to build that side of things. So, the answer is that it is through that incentivisation and the commercial development of anaerobic digesters that the use for that would be taken forward.

Mr McMullan: How much of that waste do you think could go to the private sector for food waste to energy?

Mr Dukelow: To be clear, the Department is not being prescriptive about what happens to the management of food waste. Our regulations are designed to ensure that much more food waste tonnage is separately collected by councils and by commercial businesses. It is then managed by councils through contracts with facilities and anaerobic digestion facilities or otherwise.

Mr McMullan: I will stop you there. Do we know how much is going into waste to energy?

Mr Dukelow: I do not have the figures, but I can hopefully get them for you.

Mr McMullan: That is a grey area that needs to be looked at, because if there is a need for that and a benefit from it, we should be looking at it. I do not think that there are any figures for it.

The Chairperson (Ms Dillon): Oliver spoke about the French model. The Research and Information Service did a paper for us, which was presented just prior to your presentation. We can get it forwarded to you for comment on whether the Department will look at those types of measures.

Oliver touched on the single waste authority. Would that be beneficial? I was previously on Mid Ulster council and one of the big challenges was that we went from a position of getting money from recycling waste to one of rising costs, and we had to put up rates for householders just to stand still and provide nothing else other than to be able to deal with waste. We were not able to do anything on economic development or any other type of project. We were just standing still on all that kind of stuff. Would a single waste authority help with that? I think you said that there are three recycling companies. I thought that it was only two when I was on the council, but there may well be three. They seem to have it very well wrapped up and the councils are paying a very high price. We talked about a single waste authority at that time in council and asked whether it would be better if, at least, a number of councils — not necessarily all 11 — came together to deal with their own waste or to set up a social economy business or something of that nature.

Mr T Irwin: The fact that there is an increasing cost for doing this has formed part of the discussions with other councils, and part of that may be related to the fact that they are not able to take full advantage of economies of scale, which something like a single waste authority might provide.

Mr Mills: It is fair to say that Arc21 provides that to some extent at least. Two sets of councils have waste management authorities and, to some extent, Arc21 provides that sort of filter to try to combat the points that you are making about individual councils being picked off or tied into various contracts. The second point is that procurement is one of the strands that has been identified in the action plan as an area to be looked at. If there is not a waste authority, which is kind of like a governance structure point of view, there is virtue in looking at common procurement policies.

The Chairperson (Ms Dillon): That is excellent. My next question was going to be about what we would do if we do not have the authority. I sincerely hope that all action plans are being rural-proofed, even those for a single waste authority and whatever is happening in waste management.

Mr Mills: OK.

The Chairperson (Ms Dillon): I assume, given that it lies in the same Department, that that will be happening, but it is always good to drive home that it needs to be rural-proofed.

Mr Ford: Thanks for your presentation. I am getting slightly confused. The strategy was published in 2013. It does not have a closing date, although there are a number of dates in its actions and targets between 2013 and 2020, the bulk of which are in the first half of the period. We also talked about the current action plan and one of your slides on the circular economy mentions proposals that go as far as 2030. Have you published anything on how well those actions and targets from the strategy have been achieved to date? Given that we are now at the end of 2016, a number of them should have been reached. How does that tie into your current planning? Most of these strategies tend to have a close date and a point by which we know matters will be reviewed.

Mr Dukelow: On the first point, we monitor the actions and targets in the strategy published in 2013 and report on them every six months. We have reported to the waste programme board every six months.

Mr Ford: Are those published? I cannot find them.

Mr Dukelow: No, they are not published documents but I imagine, depending on the Minister's agreement, we would have no great difficulty in making those reports available to the Committee.

Mr Ford: That would be useful, Chair, just to see how we are getting on.

Mr Dukelow: You are right when you say that the strategy does not have an end date. Most of the major targets relate to 2020. The strategy was written largely for that timescale. Making proposals for 2030 is a more recent development, through the EU circular economy package. Obviously, we need to be mindful of future potential targets, which may or may not influence our policy going forward. In statutory terms, we are obliged to revise the strategy every six years. In effect, we would be looking to revise the current strategy in 2019-2020 in any case.

Mr Ford: I make the point that I made to Suzie earlier: there is a lot of concentration on household or municipal waste with varying definitions accepted at different times. We do not seem to be terribly clued in, through real data, about things like the construction industry and how demolitions and quarries are dealt with. Is that a gap? While I am being slightly difficult, is there also a danger of an excessive concentration on waste for energy, particularly on incineration-type processes as opposed to anaerobic digestion?

Mr Mills: Just while my colleagues think of more exact answers, I would say that the recycling rate is something like 79% currently for industrial, commercial and demolition waste, and the target is 70% by 2020. I defend the concentration on the 43% when we have achieved 50% on municipal waste.

On excessive energy from waste, the waste hierarchy has various segments, one of which is for recovery of energy. I would not have thought that we concentrate excessively on that, but we want to tackle all sectors. In general terms, the policy is that it is better to recycle than recover from energy and better to do that than landfill. It is all about trying to push waste up that inverted pyramid.

Mr Ford: Is there a danger that energy from waste is stopping some elements from being pushed back up the pyramid?

Mr Mills: That is a valid point. We would look at the amount that is exported at the moment and say that, potentially, business and public-sector procurement proposals could address that. However, I agree that we would not want to burn or incinerate so much that we start reducing the amount of recycling. That would be counter to our policy. The policy is to recycle more and landfill less first, then recover less and recycle more. So, we absolutely agree with the point that you are making on policy direction.

Mr McKee: I have a difficulty with waste management in general. People at home spend their time separating waste into bins of various colours and then it all goes through the process. We are trying to do this for the environment, and yet it appears from what I hear that there is clearly no strategy in the government body to dispose of this waste in Northern Ireland so as to generate electricity. We are too intent on sending our waste to other countries for them to take the benefit of it. If they were not benefiting from it, they would not take it. Obviously, there is a monetary gain for them, and I would not like to think that hazardous waste is going to China, which we have not touched on. It would be interesting to hear the outcome of that. There is somewhere in the region of 55,000 tons of waste being exported from Northern Ireland to the South. Does any of that waste come back again for any

reason? There are figures for waste coming back to Northern Ireland which I am not sure of the purpose of or where it goes.

Mr Mills: I will let others pick up on the details. Certainly, some of it has come back, and not as we would wish to see it.

The better the recycling separation the more valuable our waste is and the more value we can get out of it. We are doing this for the environment, but there is a strong case to be made that this makes business sense as well. If our three big recyclers had a better quality of recycling, they reckon that they can, perhaps, improve their productivity by about 50%. In Northern Ireland, if we provide better recycling to our recyclers they do not have to buy the raw material from abroad.

If we can avoid landfill tax, which goes to the Treasury, we will keep money in Northern Ireland. There are very strong business and economic reasons for promoting recycling.

Mr Williamson: We all know about waste deposits, including that in the repatriation programme mentioned earlier in the researcher's briefing, which we clearly do not want from the Republic of Ireland and is part of a programme to repatriate waste. In more recent times we have found illegal landfill sites in the Tyrone area which have waste from the Republic of Ireland in them.

In general, outside that illegal activity which we obviously want to avoid and stop, there are about 15,500 trans-frontier shipments of waste that we, as an agency, monitor on a yearly basis. Obviously, not all of that is from the Republic of Ireland but a proportion of it will be, and I cannot tell you the exact figure. This is driven by the commercial companies involved and, primarily in the Republic as you heard earlier, is contracted out to private companies. A lot of that waste will move, because of its value, and transit Northern Ireland. I have recent evidence from a case which is under investigation, where waste is moving between the Republic of Ireland, transiting through Northern Ireland and going to landfill in Scotland. That is all driven by the commercial aspects and the benefits to the commercial companies. Some of these companies are UK-wide and others are European-wide, and the business model is the driver of that rather than policy.

Mr McKee: Have we a plan, as a government body, for this landfill for incineration or generating electricity out of the waste as opposed to it going away?

Mr Mills: There is an ongoing procurement by the Arc21 management group of councils to procure an energy from waste facility in the Newtownabbey area. That is at the planning appeal stage. The Planning Appeals Commission has just heard a case on its planning. That will go to the Infrastructure Minister for development. Once the planning is decided, it will go forward to the procurement phase.

Incidentally, you are quite right about the advantage to others when waste is exported. For example, Copenhagen's electricity is largely provided by energy from waste.

Mr T Irwin: There is also the energy from waste facility that RiverRidge is doing at Bombardier which has received planning approval, and is moving forward.

Mr McKee: Where do the 5,790,000 tons of indicative waste originate from in Northern Ireland? The pie chart gives a construction, demolition and excavation figure, but it certainly does not do it justice. Are you talking about tonnage as weight or volume? If you are comparing hard-core waste it can range from one ton for soil to two tons for concrete products. If you take weight, it is not really a fair analysis. If it were volume, that chart would be very different.

Mr Dukelow: That is correct. Waste arisings across Europe have always been measured in terms of tonnage, but you are quite correct in what you say.

Mr W Irwin: Has anybody been brought before the courts in relation to waste crime? Is there a deterrent for it?

Mr Williamson: In the last five years — I am talking about from 2011 to 2015 — the average number of prosecutions taken by the environmental crime unit was about 28 a year. Those are probably the most serious environmental crimes; they do not include, for example, lower level cases where we issue a warning, a statutory notice or a fixed penalty notice. They are the more significant cases. Attached to that, in the same period, the average confiscation order awarded is in the region of

£70,000. There is a deterrent. I think that we all struggle — I certainly do — with the question of whether it is fully effective. We still have illegal waste activity, and it is a significant problem. As the Chair mentioned, you will probably hear more about that next week when I make a presentation before you.

Mr W Irwin: I had a local incident in which a road contractor dumped a lot of stuff on a particular piece of land. Environmental crime was involved, and it brought a case before the DPP. To my amazement, the DPP said that it was not in the public interest to prosecute, which was a very strange response. He did not say that there was not enough evidence; he said that it was not in the public interest.

Mr Williamson: I am afraid that that is not something that I can comment on. You would have to ask the DPP.

Mr W Irwin: It seemed very strange.

The Chairperson (Ms Dillon): We will probably delve into that issue more next week, William. You are right, Derek: whilst it is not for you to answer for the DPP, we need to scope out whether there are questions that we need to ask the DPP.

Mr W Irwin: It was in the region of 23,000 tons of waste. An independent survey was done on that land —

Mr Williamson: To be fair, I think that you have to understand the individual circumstance. I am not trying to defend anyone's decision, but, in a case like that, you would need to understand all the detail and the evidence before you reach a conclusion as to whether the right decision was made.

Mr W Irwin: I understand. OK.

Mr Anderson: I will not move into that area this week. To develop any waste management strategy, it would take all councils to come on board with some common ground. Mr Poots talked about 60% recycling for one council and 29% for another in the worst-case scenario. That leads me to ask this: what methods are being used in one area against another, bearing in mind that it is not a one-size-fits-all scenario? More should be coming together; you should try to meet in the middle somewhere to get better recycling rates so that you reach 50% by 2020. The talk is that it may have plateaued at a percentage somewhere in the 40s. We have a big job of work to do. There are two management groups at the minute: Arc21 and the North West Region Waste Management Group. The former SWaMP was involved with a number of councils. I sat on SWaMP many years ago as a councillor. Did it submit a plan to the Department?

Mr Mills: Yes.

Mr Anderson: They are all coming with their different plans. Did five out of six councils in Arc21 say that they will run with that?

Mr Mills: All the Arc21 councils signed up to the approach.

Mr Anderson: You see where I am coming from. How do we get to a position where we get everyone singing from the same hymn sheet to get a common policy?

Mr T Irwin: The waste management plans are supposed to be aligned to the waste management strategy. They should all seek to achieve some aims on recycling, reuse and recovery and so on. Where it differs is in how they go about that process, how much effort goes into it, the nature of the area, the households and the infrastructure that supports that, right from the bins that are used, the collection rates, the civic amenity sites and how much effort the councils put into pushing for those.

Mr Dukelow: If I may add something. Figures were given earlier about the worst-performing council recycling 29% and the best-performing council recycling 60%. Many of the worst-performing councils at that time did not provide brown bin collections for garden waste. Most of them did not provide separate food waste collections at that time. There is a recognition in the Department and, frankly, in

the new councils that there needs to be a more consistent approach, and there is a recognition in the Department that, to some extent, we need to drive that in partnership with the councils.

Mr Anderson: Can you see a willingness from the councils to try to get to that position?

Mr Dukelow: That is borne out in the work that we have been completing over the last number of months in partnership with the new 11 councils to develop an action plan that will identify, through the recycling gap analysis, the best approaches and options for councils to take, based on best practice across Northern Ireland and beyond.

Mr Mills: All 11 councils have signed up to that.

Mr Anderson: If you are to take on board best practice, surely there is a template, and some are doing it better than others. When the councils were trying to reach targets, did they go the opposite way at any time? Did the 29% or the ones in-between ever go backwards?

Mr Dukelow: From memory, I do not think that any councils have ever gone backwards in recycling percentages, but, given that the gradient has been quite steep over the last 10 years, we expect councils to increase recycling rates quite significantly, certainly historically. There are certain reasons why some councils have not been increasing significantly, including the lack of separate collections for separate waste streams.

Mr Anderson: We may need to focus on methods of collection. It may be difficult because of local areas, but can we get to a position of having a better collection system?

Mr Mills: That is a valid point, and it is being looked at. Many scenarios have been looked at in a study about kerbside collection, co-mingled collection or other scenarios, and the best, most cost-effective approaches and those with the biggest return are being identified. That study is being done.

Mr Dukelow: May I add that, whilst we recognise the need to work in partnership with councils, as we have been doing over the last number of months, to drive forward that work, the Department also recognises the need to drive progress on recycling independently. That is why we introduced the food waste regulations. We consulted councils, but, nevertheless, it requires a consistent approach to the collection of food waste from April 2017 across all councils.

Mr Anderson: If we focus on that, there may be more opportunities to reach those targets, but it is not an easy task. We are coming from a situation in which different councils had their own ways of doing things, and they may need to refocus to see what the best scenario is in order to standardise. It will not be easy because of locations, but I think that that is the way forward. I did not touch on anything else there.

The Chairperson (Ms Dillon): You were very well behaved. Thank you.

Mr McMullan: I have a very quick question. In view of Brexit, do you see the Department introducing new policies to work with a European country to manage the control of cross-border waste? Will you have to retain EU laws to work with the South of Ireland?

Mr Mills: We do not know what form Brexit will take, so it is very hard to answer that question. If the UK remained a member of the European economic area, for example, that would require compliance with current EU waste legislation. It is hard to see any change in that scenario. If one goes completely the other way, it is hard to say. However, as a principle, cooperation with the South across a range of areas is a high priority.

Mr McMullan: I see that, all through the briefing, when we talk about converting waste to energy, we are talking about incineration. I have not seen gasification mentioned as an alternative. Are we not looking at an alternative for converting waste to energy?

Mr Mills: We were using the term generically. For the RiverRidge Full Circle facility, the private sector proposal that we talked about is gasification.

Mr T Irwin: We do not rule out any particular technology. It is for the commercial side of things to decide what —

Mr McMullan: Investigations and programmes were put in place to look at different technologies, gasification etc. I sat on the North West Region Waste Management Group, and we looked at all those. Are the reports from the groups at that time still live? I am going back to 2007-08 and up to 2011, when there was a lot of work going on. SWaMP2008, Arc21 and the North West Region Waste Management Group were all there. We looked at all of those. We had presentations from all the private sector organisations that had their own programmes. What happened to all that information?

Mr Mills: Arc21 is the only procurement that is still live. The questions of what technology they want to follow are a matter between them and their bidder.

Mr McMullan: We got down to a preferred bidder in some cases. A lot of money was spent — millions. What happened to all that?

Mr Dukelow: Those questions really need to be asked of the waste management group rather than the Department. We are not in direct drive for infrastructure. Those were their plans.

Mr McMullan: I understand that. Do you know what is happening or where those are?

Mr Mills: Those proposals have terminated. As I said, the only remaining proposal for a public-sector energy-from-waste facility or contract with the public sector is Arc21.

Mr McMullan: Those have all terminated, and all that work and the millions of pounds are gone.

Mr Dukelow: We cannot say that. It is really for the North West Region Waste Management Group to inform you as to whether it will ever take on those proposals again.

Mr McMullan: I would have thought that someone in the Department might have known something, but there you go.

The Chairperson (Ms Dillon): There are another couple of points, but we can forward those to you in written form to get a response because we are running a wee bit behind time. Thank you very much for your presentation. We look forward to seeing you again next week, when, I am sure, you will get quite a grilling on waste crime. I appreciate your coming along today.