

Speech: Please don't waste this moment

Thank you very much.

It's a great pleasure to be here and I'm very much looking forward to hearing from Sue Hayman next.

Sue wrote in Labour's Environment Policy:

The environment is the bedrock of our economy, our security and our wellbeing. It is not something separate from ourselves; it is the food we eat and the place we live.

I couldn't agree more.

The problems we need to overcome – and the opportunities that work offers us – are all interwoven.

Plastic waste, climate change, biodiversity loss, and even maintaining clean bathing water around the coast for the summer holidays – these are all threads in the same tapestry.

The action demanded by climate protestors in 2019, involves practical steps to improve waste disposal, and manage the land sustainably, as well as cleaning up energy use (after all, fossil fuels are key to plastic production).

And that requires getting everyone in our democratic society to recognise their responsibilities in managing the potentially catastrophic, (but certainly existentially threatening), environmental challenges ahead.

Which is not straightforward.

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Unfortunately, one of the lasting effects of the industrial and transport revolutions of the 18th and 20th centuries was to disconnect people from their environmental impacts.

This brought undeniable progress, but also increasingly removed society from where raw materials, energy, manufactured goods, and food are produced – and from where waste is disposed.

And “thank God for that” – you might say.

Confronted with the reality of modern industrial-scale waste disposal, a common and understandable response is: “Not In My Back Yard”.

But a side effect of that disconnection has fostered a loss of personal accountability for what we throw away.

And now we see the ugly accumulative effect of that loss in:

- Litter on the pavements of towns and cities.
- Fly-tipping in green fields or beside country lanes.
- And, plastic waste on the land, in rivers, and in the sea.

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In his introduction to the Government's Waste and Resources Strategy, the Secretary of State said: "Radical action is necessary to improve our use of resources and our handling of waste."

The people in this room hold the key to that radical action, and the Environment Agency is here to help.

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Waste companies are the unsung heroes of the environmental movement – making sure all that waste which disappears from our doorsteps ends up in the right place.

The Environment Agency regulates businesses that manage, treat, recycle, and dispose of waste.

We work with them to make sure waste sites are well run and don't harm people or the environment. For example, our waste permits make sure that litter doesn't escape from landfill sites.

We work to try and drive resource efficiency and re-use. We promote the use of waste as a resource, and have helped divert 61 million tonnes of waste from landfill since 2007, saving businesses £466 million.

And we help police the polluters: the operators who don't comply with environmental regulations; and the organised gangs of waste criminals who blight local communities, legitimate businesses, and the environment.

In a recent interview, our Chief Executive James Bevan compared waste criminals to the mafia.

He's not wrong.

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Waste crime is increasingly organised, involving career criminals engaged in sophisticated fraud.

It involves illegal exports, fly-tipping and burning of waste, as well as tax avoidance.

It is no coincidence that organised waste crime is also deeply implicated in the incidence of modern slavery in the UK.

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In 2017/18 local authorities dealt with nearly 100,000 incidents of fly-tipping in England, and the cost to councils for clearing that up is about £58 million.

The combined cost of fly-tipping to private landowners is estimated at somewhere between £50 and £150 million a year.

Environment Agency officers are working hard to combat waste crime. It is dangerous and difficult work.

In 2017/18 the Environment Agency stopped over 800 illegal waste sites – more than two a day.

But, during the same period we identified over 850 more. For every one we were closing down, we found more than one new site.

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We've been given new powers to make us even more effective, and can now lock up illegal waste sites and force rogue operators to clear up problem sites.

We can also seize and destroy vehicles being used in waste crime.

We continue to work hard with the police, HMRC, local authorities, and other partners, to identify and tackle it.

And, we work with businesses and the public to make sure they understand their own duty of care obligations – their responsibility for the waste they produce.

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Despite the scale of the challenge, we shouldn't let waste crime characterise everything that happens on waste here.

There ARE reasons to be cheerful.

- In the first decade of this century we reduced use of resources by 30 million tonnes while the population grew by 6 percent.
- We reduced our waste output by 10 percent, and we more than doubled production of secondary raw materials.
- As that happened, the economy grew by 20 percent.

Household waste recycling rates in England have risen from about 11 percent in 2000 to about 45 percent now.

Great news. But most of that was achieved by 2012. Since 2013, household and construction waste recycling has plateaued.

We needed a wake-up call. And we got one.

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Almost overnight, the "Blue Planet effect" drove the issue of plastic waste

up the public and political agenda.

Over a year later, it continues to inspire action.

Campaigns by organisations like Keep Britain Tidy and Greenpeace have found new wind in their sails.

It is influencing peoples' choices about what to buy and where to shop. Supermarkets including Iceland and Tesco have made pledges to reduce plastic packaging.

WRAP – the Waste and Resources Action Programme – has launched its Plastics Pact to help create a circular economy for plastics. Dozens of the UK's biggest business and organisations are signing up to it. The Environment Agency is among them.

And parliament and the government are acting too. You could be forgiven for thinking there is only one subject being discussed in Westminster at the moment, but the Blue Planet effect has been felt there too.

I think Sue will back me up when I say that MPs from across the political spectrum are giving unprecedented attention to plastics.

Just look at the 5p plastic bag charge:

- Since it was introduced in 2015, the number of bags used has fallen by over 80 percent.
- 13 billion bags have been taken out of circulation in the last 2 years.
- And CEFAS have estimated a 50 percent reduction in plastic bag marine litter since the charge was introduced.

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The government's 25 Year Environment Plan commits to eliminating all avoidable plastic waste by 2042.

The Resources and Waste Strategy includes proposals which will:

- Extend producer responsibility for packaging, ensuring that producers pay the full cost of its disposal.
- Stimulate demand for recycled plastic through new taxes.
- Ban plastic products where there is a clear case for alternatives.
- And improve recycling rates by implementing consistent collections across the country.

The Environment Agency is expanding the evidence base to better understand the sources, scale and impact of plastics pollution.

We're working with partners – like water companies – to understand micro-plastics in the water environment so that we can take better action.

We're looking at the issue of plastics in soil and working on farm assurance schemes with WRAP, the NFU, and the Renewable Energy Association, to address

both the plastic waste produced by agriculture, and how we can reduce plastic contamination in the bio-waste which is spread on farmland.

And we want to help the business entrepreneurs and innovators who are developing new products or technologies – as a regulator we are looking at how we can provide advice on permitting and definitions of waste.

As a business ourselves, we're making sure we are an exemplar. We've cut plastic waste in our own laboratories by nearly 70 percent.

And we are doing what we can to influence change in others – in the Defra group; with our suppliers; with the partners we work with, and in the communities we serve.

Plastics pollution is an enormous challenge, it will take an immense group effort to tackle it, and it will be worth it.

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But, let's not stop there.

We need to give the same focus to all the resources we use, and everything we throw away.

Whether we are talking about the food we buy in the supermarket, the water coming out of our taps, or the energy warming and lighting our homes.

Waste isn't just what we put in our bins or our recycling boxes. It's what we flush down the drains and put into the atmosphere. Everything that ends up – one way or another – being put back into the soil, rivers and seas, and the air.

We are part of a global economy, shipping resources and waste around the world. We also import and export pollution.

So let's not be parochial about this. Keeping Britain Tidy is a global effort.

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It's achievable.

The climate protests inspired by Greta Thunberg fill me with optimism.

A new generation of school age international activists are demanding action for the future of the planet.

They want their parents, teachers and politicians to take responsibility.

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Please don't waste this moment.

We must not let them down.

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Thank you to Keep Britain Tidy for their work raising awareness, inspiring action, and also for inviting me to speak today.