

Speech: The tip beneath the iceberg

Thank you.

The picture on the cover of May's National Geographic last year, was of a plastic bag.

But, looking at it, you didn't necessarily see that straight away.

A small corner of the white bag poked out over the surface of, what looked like, the deep blue sea.

At the same time, you could see much more of it submerged beneath the waves.

It looked – at first glance – as if you were looking at an iceberg.

It's a powerful – and deceptively simple – piece of political art.

But, if we thought last May that the tip of an iceberg was a fitting metaphor for our plastic waste problem, then this year we discovered that it goes even deeper than the icebergs themselves.

In May this year, a plastic bag was found at the bottom of the Marianna Trench – the world's deepest ocean trench – during a deep submersible expedition.

And is it any wonder, when in this country alone, the Canal and River Trust has said that 14 million items of plastic end up in waterways every year.

I suspect that many members of the Chartered Institution of Wastes Management, the Environmental Services Association, the Resource Association, and experts at the Waste and Resources Action Programme have been crying out for our waste problems to receive this level of attention for a long time.

And, although everyone in this room brings a professional practicality to managing society's waste, we cannot afford to become inured to the shocking images we see in the media.

Public awareness has exploded since the airing of Blue Planet 2 about 18 months ago.

And if, like me, you tuned in to watch the BBC's War on Plastic on Monday night, you'll know that waste is still in the spotlight.

Where it should be.

The fact that this moment of recognition continues to endure today is testament not only to scale of the problem...

But – I think – a very primal fear that we may have reached a point of no return; of irrevocable damage; of sadness, and danger.

We cannot afford to think like that for too long either.

We must all see this moment as an opportunity to drive the changes we have wanted for a long time.

Many of you will be familiar with the Environment Agency's work in this area, but for those that aren't – here's a brief overview.

We regulate businesses that manage, treat, recycle, and dispose of waste.

We ensure waste sites don't harm people or the environment.

For example, our waste permits make sure that litter doesn't escape from landfill sites.

We promote waste as a resource, and have helped divert 61 million tonnes of waste from landfill since 2007, saving businesses £466 million.

And, we tackle waste crime.

Which – unfortunately – is a lucrative industry, often driven by criminal groups also involved in theft, modern slavery, fraud, drugs, smuggling, conspiracy, firearms, and money laundering.

The ways we deal with waste crime have been changing in recent years, and as a result we've become much more successful at identifying illegal activity, catching the offenders, and stopping the crime.

Just last week, our work meant that three waste criminals have been given prison sentences – and told to pay back nearly a quarter of a million pounds – after fly-tipping “on a commercial scale” across Barking, Havering, Hertfordshire and Essex between 2012 and 2014.

This approach to waste crime has provided an opportunity to share information and data much more effectively across the law enforcement community, and to adopt a risk-based, targeted selection of priorities for action.

In 2017/18 the Environment Agency stopped over 800 illegal waste sites – more than two a day, and over 50% within 90 days.

But, for every one we were closing down, we found more than one new site – over 850 more.

We are in the process of setting up a Joint Unit for Waste Crime, with our partner law enforcement agencies, to further develop our collaborative approach to intelligence and operational enforcement activity.

Our work has produced a lot of good results, and put a lot of criminals in the dock.

But, we often see where regulation isn't able to deliver what is needed to meet the overarching challenges of a circular economy, such as the build-up of plastics in the environment, or – more recently and suddenly – the Chinese

export ban of low-grade recyclates.

Up until now, various regulations have impacted on different waste streams.

The Landfill Directive reduced untreated waste to landfill without really setting a very clear picture of where the waste should go.

As the years have gone by, a more complex network of waste sites has sprung up.

The operators have not always been capable enough or funded adequately for 21st century waste treatment.

This has resulted in:

- unpredictable market fluctuations making recycling a challenge
- incomplete data
- lack of information
- fridge mountains
- flytipping
- and, illegal waste sites.

We have tried to deal with the symptoms but what we really needed was a coherent strategy.

That's why the cultural shift of the last 18 months, led by celebrities, NGOs, and even government itself is to be welcomed.

Because even though most people outside the waste and environmental sectors probably still don't know what we mean by term "the circular economy"...

Many members of the public will have seen the images in the news and reasoned that we need to move towards a system that looks something like it.

Launching the government's Resources and Waste Strategy in December, the Secretary of State, Michael Gove, said:

Our goal is to move to a more circular economy which keeps resources in use for longer – for that to happen, we must all reduce, reuse and recycle more than we do now.

More specifically, the government says the strategy will:

- ensure producers pay the full net costs of disposal or recycling of packaging by extending producer responsibility – (up from just 10% now)
- it will review producer responsibility schemes for items that can be harder or costly to recycle, including cars, electrical goods, and batteries
- it will introduce a consistent set of recyclable materials collected from all households and businesses – and consistent labelling on packaging so consumers know what they can recycle

(Household waste recycling rates in England rose from around 11% in 2000/1 to about 45%, but since 2013 rates have plateaued.)

They also say it will:

- ensure weekly collections of food waste for every household
- introduce a deposit return scheme, subject to consultation, to increase the recycling of single-use drinks containers
- explore mandatory guarantees and extended warranties on products, to encourage manufacturers to design products that last longer, and encourage repair and re-use
- introduce annual reporting of food surplus and waste by food businesses

And,

- clamp-down on illegal movements of waste at home and abroad by introducing compulsory electronic tracking of waste, and tougher penalties for waste criminals.

As with the 25 Year Environment Plan, the Environment Agency helped the government to draft the strategy and we have many important roles within it – for Producer Responsibility, Waste Crime, and Waste Tracking.

The circular economy must be the way forward – and this strategy presents a huge opportunity to turn rhetoric into action.

It deals with everything from design to end point.

It encourages information e.g. mandatory waste tracking, and informed choice driving different behaviour.

It has a focus on preventing waste crime.

It also drives the polluter pays principle by extending producer responsibility. Those who create plastic will have to fund its recycling and re-use.

It is about natural capital and ensuring we conserve natural resources.

All of that said: this strategy is not the whole answer.

We need tougher regulations on Duty of Care, waste exports and technical competence.

We need to underpin this strategy by ensuring those who we licence to operate within the waste sector are both technically capable, and financially able, to discharge their obligations.

We need to ensure that waste exports are properly described and don't allow an easy and cheap route to avoid UK regulation.

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To address the root causes of our waste problems, waste producers must do the

right thing, not just do the minimum as all too often happens now.

We need to see a change in attitude: waste isn't something to be got rid of, but something to be valued.

So, markets need to work better to ensure more demand for secondary raw materials.

It is no longer good enough to pass your waste to someone else and assume or hope that it is recycled or disposed of properly; or worse just not care.

The UK must have the right waste infrastructure in the right places to make it easier for businesses and others to do the right thing, collecting, moving, reprocessing and recycling wastes into consistently good quality secondary materials.

In February, Defra consulted on the consistency in collection of recyclable materials from households and businesses.

Current legislation has led to diverse recycling collection across the country leading to confusion.

This leads to contamination of dry recyclates with food and glass, non-recyclable materials being presented, and – worryingly – it de-motivates people from recycling at all.

Defra propose to legislate for all local authorities in England to be required to collect a minimum or core set of 'dry' recyclable materials from kerbside households and flats.

This will ensure that every householder is able to recycle a consistent set of materials.

The proposals would also put in place requirements to collect food and green waste separately from the dry recyclables.

There are parallel proposals to introduce a similar range of materials to be collected from businesses.

In terms of innovation, Electronic Waste Tracking is a transformational digital services project to better understand how waste is generated, handled, recovered, or disposed of.

We need reliable and accurate data on where waste goes, leading to more effective waste regulation and policy, which will in turn help to drive improved business productivity and investment in waste infrastructure and systems, as well as reducing waste crime.

Over the coming months, the government will also be considering legislative changes that will be needed to implement a waste tracking service, this could include powers in the forthcoming Environment Bill and work around charging.

The changes we need to see are profound and won't be met by a government

strategy alone.

A key part of this is education – and encouraging young people to pursue a career in the waste sector.

I'm pleased to know that we have been working with CIWM on this at university level, holding lectures and providing resources at Plymouth University.

As the values of society change, the way we spend our money follows. Getting ahead of that is a business opportunity.

The 5p plastic bag charge has seen 13 billion bags taken out of circulation in the last 2 years. And, it is interesting to see Waitrose trialling groceries without packaging – I hope it catches on.

We also need to see this in the investment community.

I celebrate WRAP's work to show businesses how moving to new business models, and encouraging transparency in the supply chain, actually makes businesses a more stable investment proposition in the long run.

Ultimately, when consumers can see trusted company logos in amongst the waste piling up around them, it's damaging for a brand.

I began by talking about the extraordinary public support for change we have seen in the last 18 months.

We must surf the wave of enthusiasm for change.

I see that enthusiasm every day as I meet colleagues at the Environment Agency and our partners – businesses like yours.

I see that enthusiasm in Greta Thunberg, Extinction Rebellion, and the youth movements all over the world.

We know how passionate young people are across the country about tackling complacency in the face of catastrophe and taking action now to safeguard their environment for the future.

I'm delighted to see today the Prime Minister set a legal target for the UK to reach net zero carbon emissions by 2050 – and establish a Youth Steering Group which will advise them and review progress against their commitments.

Our individual actions count too, no matter how small – from the amount of water we use at home to the products we recycle and reuse.

The new Resources and Waste Strategy gives us the framework to begin.

It is important that we make full use of it – from the cradle to the grave.

Thank you.