

House of Commons
Environmental Audit Committee

**MEASURING THE
QUALITY OF LIFE:
THE 2001 SUSTAINABLE
DEVELOPMENT
HEADLINE INDICATORS**

Fourth Report of Session 2001–02

Reports from the Environmental Audit Committee since 1997

2001-02 Session

- First Departmental Responsibilities for Sustainable Development, HC 326
- Second Pre-Budget Report 2001: *A New Agenda?*, HC 363
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2000-01 Session

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DEVELOPMENT
HEADLINE INDICATORS**

Fourth Report of Session 2001–02

*Report, together with
Proceedings of the Committee and
Minutes of Evidence*

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ENVIRONMENTAL AUDIT COMMITTEE

Remit

The Environmental Audit Committee is appointed by the House of Commons to consider to what extent the policies and programmes of government departments and non-departmental public bodies contribute to environmental protection and sustainable development; to audit their performance against such targets as may be set for them by Her Majesty's Ministers; and to report thereon to the House.

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Footnotes

In the footnotes of this Report, references to oral evidence are indicated by 'Q' followed by the question number. References to written evidence are indicated by the page number as in 'Ev 12'.

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FOURTH REPORT

The Environmental Audit Committee has agreed to the following Report:

MEASURING THE QUALITY OF LIFE: THE 2001 SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT HEADLINE INDICATORS

LIST OF CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The 2001 Barometer

1. DEFRA has published an updated (June 2002) Quality of Life Barometer leaflet since we took evidence from Mr Meacher. This summarises the current position for the headline indicators. We are pleased to note that this version of the barometer incorporates a number of presentational changes which the Committee proposed in its oral evidence session with Mr Meacher. We commend the Government for this action and these changes are considered in the body of our report (para 6).

Data Analysis

2. Statistics are open to a variety of interpretations. The traffic light markings have an even greater element of subjectivity. The judgement linking the data presented and the “traffic light” assessment awarded is not explicit. We recommend that in future each headline indicator assessment be accompanied by a short justification of that marking and that future reports state clearly what constitutes “significant change” in awarding the assessments (para 19).
3. Third party validation of the Government’s “traffic light” indicator assessments is necessary to neutralise unfounded claims of partiality which could themselves undermine the credibility of the indicators. Such validation could be achieved by the use of independent consultants. Alternatively, the Government’s annual report on the headline indicators could include a statement from the Sustainable Development Commission outlining how far it agreed with the Government’s assessments (para 25).

Media Coverage

4. The launch of the 2001 barometer and related DEFRA press release led to some unfortunate media coverage which did little to advance the Government’s cause in entrenching the headline indicators in the public psyche as clear and trusted signals of the UK’s progress towards the Government’s sustainable development goals (para 26).
5. We recommend that DEFRA’s Communications Strategy for the 2003 report on the headline indicators reviews media coverage of the previous annual reports and considers how future presentation can minimise past pitfalls (para 29).

Specific Indicators

Waste (H15)

6. At present there is insufficient comparable data for the waste headline indicator. Thus no traffic light assessment for the “since the Strategy” period is provided in the 2001 report (para 34).
7. Mr Meacher was keen to reassure us that the lack of data provision was not an attempt by the Government to mask the poor trends in waste arisings and management. He told us “Let me make this absolutely clear, waste is a problem area, it is a red area...”. We agree (para 35).
8. We note that the updated, June 2002 barometer includes a newly split indicator which awards a “traffic light” assessment for household waste (red) and all waste streams (no comparable data). We welcome Mr Meacher’s action in response to our concerns. This will make recent trends in waste arisings clearer to the public. However, in future, the public may actually find the split confusing when *municipal waste* rather than *household waste* is reported as an indicator at EU level. The Government should consider how it will guard against this situation (para 40).

Transport (H11)

9. If the traffic indicator were awarded a “green light” this would not indicate an absolute reduction in vehicle miles but a slower rate of growth. The report does not conceal this vital distinction but nor is it explicit in the presentation of this indicator. It should be. This potential for confusion underlines the need to clearly set out objectives against indicators (para 44).
10. The rate of traffic growth is an appropriate indicator for the overall progress of Government transport policy. The Government expects the package of measures in the 10 year transport plan to reduce traffic growth, although this is not an explicit aim, therefore performance can be judged against this indicator. However, the lack of specific Government targets relating to traffic growth or traffic levels does not give us confidence that the transport headline indicator forms the intended feedback necessary to inform policy decisions. The Government should explain why it is content to use the rate of traffic growth as a headline indicator but is unwilling to have any specific targets relating to traffic levels or traffic growth (para 46).

Climate change (H9)

11. DEFRA’s latest data shows that the decrease in greenhouse gases has levelled off, while carbon dioxide (the main greenhouse gas) emissions actually increased in both 2000 and 2001 (para 48).
12. The simple green light for this indicator, in the absence of an explanation in the headline indicator summary, has the potential to lead to confusion over meaning and scepticism over objectivity. We accept that short term fluctuations in trends are to be expected and should not be allowed to skew the “traffic light” assessments of long-term indicators. They should, however, be acknowledged and explained in the report (para 50).

Geographical Coverage

- 13. We recommend that the Government clarify how it is seeking to achieve a uniform geographic basis across all the headline indicators (para 51).**
- 14. We encourage the UK Government to continue to work collaboratively with the devolved administrations in developing comparable indicator reporting systems. We believe that in the absence of a standardised UK view, any summary assessments of the indicators from the devolved administrations should be included as annexes in future UK annual review reports (para 53).**

Conclusion

- 15. The Government's overall "ten out of fifteen" (66.6 per cent) score is somewhat selective. One could just as easily present the 2001 assessments as showing that only two of the seven environmental indicators (28.6 per cent) are showing clear progress, the rest (71.4 per cent) being to some degree unsatisfactory (para 54).**
- 16. Where data is unavailable for a headline indicator in a particular year we agree that this should be marked as "incomparable data". However we recommend that, in such cases, the Government should consider providing an additional "proxy" traffic light assessment which indicates the Government's "best guess" at whether the indicator is on a sustainable track (para 55).**
- 17. The Government must ensure that appropriate data is collected. Given that the 15 headline indicators were established in 1999, we are surprised and disappointed that there is still insufficient data in some areas to provide a complete picture (para 56).**
- 18. The barometer clearly shows the environmental element of sustainable development to be the "Cinderella" of the three with little indication of how this situation is being tackled. The Government needs to demonstrate strongly its commitment to take action if trends are heading in the wrong direction so that we all can see evidence that the Government is managing and not just measuring (para 58).**

MEASURING THE QUALITY OF LIFE: THE 2001 SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT HEADLINE INDICATORS

Introduction

“Talking about sustainable development is not enough. We have to know what it is, to see how our policies are working on the ground. We must hold ourselves to account—as a government but also as a country...All this depends on devising new ways of assessing how we are doing.”

Tony Blair, Prime Minister

A better quality of life—A Strategy for Sustainable Development for the UK
May 1999

1. In May 1999, the Government unveiled fifteen headline indicators as a new way of assessing whether the UK is on track to meet the aspirations set out in its national sustainable development strategy.¹

2. These headline indicators (denoted by H1–H15) are a subset of the national core set of 150 indicators (A1–U7). The core set tend to relate to key international or national commitments or targets, or are generally recommended for use in international reporting. The headline indicators are intended to be overarching “state of the nation” indicators describing key policy objectives.² The indicators are “owned” by the Government as a whole although particular departments and agencies have particular responsibility for the data behind them.³

3. The headline indicators provide what the Government has termed a “quality of life barometer” measuring “people’s everyday concerns” such as health, jobs, air quality, traffic, housing, educational achievement, wildlife and economic prosperity.⁴ The Rt Hon. John Prescott MP was Secretary of State for Environment, Transport and the Regions when the headline indicators were launched for consultation. He made it clear that he wanted them to become just as useful and familiar to the public and policy-makers as well-established economic indicators for inflation and employment and reported as regularly in the media.⁵ He heralded the indicators as demonstrating that the Government were committed to a new way of thinking which put “environmental, social and economic concerns alongside each other at the heart of decision-making”.⁶

4. The Government is committed to reporting annually against each of the headline indicators, and to accounting for the action that it has taken, and proposes to take, in priority areas. Each indicator is given a “traffic light” marking: red (significant change in the wrong direction), amber (no significant change), or green (a significant change in the right direction). Assessments are given in two categories: “change since 1990”⁷ and “change since the strategy”.⁸ Where a trend is unacceptable, the Government is firmly committed “to adjusting policies accordingly and looking to others to join it in taking action”.⁹

¹ *A better quality of life—A Strategy for Sustainable Development for the UK*, DETR, May 1999.

² *Quality of life counts: Indicators for a strategy for sustainable development in the United Kingdom: a baseline assessment*, DETR, December 1999, para 2.13.

³ Q100–101. Annex 3 sets out the data responsibilities for each department in relation to each headline indicator.

⁴ DETR Press Release 991, *Prescott launches first ever quality of life barometer*, November 1998.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Extends the baseline data presented in *Quality of Life Counts*, using the latest available data.

⁸ Progress from the position of the available data at the time of the strategy in 1999, most of which related to 1-2 years before the Strategy.

⁹ Cm 4345, *A better quality of life: A strategy for sustainable development for the UK*, DETR, May 1999, para 3.7.

5. The Government published its first annual report on the headline indicators in January 2001¹⁰ and the second in March 2002¹¹. We took oral evidence from the Environment Minister, the Rt Hon. Michael Meacher MP on the March 2002 report. Our own report is based on this evidence and a written submission from the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA). We have concentrated our examination on the headline indicators, rather than the full set of 150. We have not sought to undertake a comprehensive review of progress on each indicator or related policies but rather to assess the overall reporting mechanism. This year we chose to focus on the more typical “environmental” indicators such as traffic, waste and climate change.

6. DEFRA has published an updated (June 2002) Quality of Life Barometer leaflet since we took evidence from Mr Meacher. This summarises the current position for the headline indicators. We are pleased to note that this version of the barometer incorporates a number of presentational changes which the Committee proposed in its oral evidence session with Mr Meacher. We commend the Government for this action and these changes are considered in the body of our report.

7. We are grateful to Paul Bolton of the House of Commons Library for his advice on the analysis of the statistics behind the indicators.

The indicator system

8. The development of the indicators and the related reporting process is outlined in Annex 1. When the Government launched its initial consultation on the form which the indicators should take, it set out the following criteria which a good indicator should satisfy. They should be:

- scientifically sound;
- technically robust;
- easily understood;
- sensitive to the change that it is intended to represent;
- measurable, and
- capable of being updated regularly.

Significantly, the Government also stated that “ideally, we also need indicators which we can use now to report on progress, which means information must be available already, or can readily be collected”.¹² We have borne these criteria in mind when considering the latest annual report on the indicators.

The 2001 barometer

9. The latest annual report on the sustainable development indicators was published in March 2002 and covers the 2001 calendar year (January 2001–December 2001). The 2002 report presents the 2001 barometer.¹³

¹⁰ *Achieving a better quality of life: Review of progress towards sustainable development - Government annual report 2000*, DETR, January 2001.

¹¹ *Achieving a better quality of life: Review of progress towards sustainable development—Government annual report 2001*, DEFRA, March 2002.

¹² *Sustainability Counts*, DETR, November 1998, para 5.1.

¹³ The first annual report on the indicators covered the period from the Sustainable Development Strategy (May 1999) to the end of 2000. DEFRA expects to publish the next report in the early months of 2003 (covering the calendar year 2002). See Ev20, para 6.

The Government's assessment

10. The report gives ten "green light" assessments out of a possible seventeen (two of the fifteen indicators are split). All three indicators relating to the economic element of the barometer (economic output, investment and employment) were marked green. However, the social element displayed a more mixed picture with improvements recorded in education standards and a fall in non-violent crime, but a rise in violent crime, no change in health, and no comparable data for housing "since the Strategy" (the trend since 1990 shows no change). The environmental indicators showed the least positive trends with only four out of the eight indicators showing significant change in the direction of the desired objective.

11. The table in Annex 2 compares the latest assessments with the 2000 barometer. The Government reports a positive movement in the climate change indicator—from amber to green, and a red trend for air quality has been reversed. However, violent crime remains a red, health, road traffic and land use indicators still show "no significant change" and the numbers of farmland birds continue to fall.

12. Mr Meacher hailed the annual report for 2001 as showing "unequivocally that as a country we are turning words into action, with ten of the fifteen headline indicators showing significant positive change since the launch of the UK Strategy".¹⁴ He also highlighted that improvements were being made across all three elements of sustainable development (social, economic and environmental)—a key test of progress although he also added that while "there have been improvements in some areas he would not claim that everything was now on the right track".¹⁵

13. The 2001 Quality of Life barometer shows improvements in some areas but there remain others, assessed as "reds", where performance is unsatisfactory. In these cases the Government is committed to adjusting policies accordingly. We expect the Government to act on this commitment with alacrity and vigour.

14. We support the Government's indicator system and practice of annual reporting against these indicators and acknowledges the UK's international lead in this area. The publication of the underpinning indicator data as it becomes available throughout the year is an excellent practice because it facilitates analysis by others. Coupled with the information provided in the annual report, this raw data enables individuals, the media and other interested organisations to judge for themselves how far along the sustainable track the UK has progressed.

Data analysis

15. The data underpinning the headline indicators is predominantly from long-running time series collected by the Government Statistical Service (GSS) or by environmental regulatory bodies such as the Environment Agency as part of National Statistics.¹⁶ In line with the Government's statistical code, data on the headline indicators and the supporting 150 indicators is published as it becomes available but the "traffic light" assessment is made only once a year when all the relevant data is brought together in the annual report.

16. The data is analysed by Government statisticians within DEFRA in consultation with the Departments responsible for the data and the relevant policy areas. The traffic light

¹⁴ DEFRA News Release 98/02, *UK quality of life barometer rises-Meacher*, 13 March 2002.

¹⁵ Ev19, para 3.

¹⁶ Ev19, para 4. National Statistics was launched in June 2000 to provide a focus for the work of the Government Statistical Service and the Office of National Statistics. This work is overseen by the National Statistician and the Chairman of the Statistics Commission. Ministerial responsibility for National Statistics lies with the Chancellor but the day to day responsibility is delegated to the Economic Secretary to the Treasury.

assessments which show the latest progress (ie “change since Strategy”) are made on the basis of this analysis and are subject to Ministerial approval before publication.¹⁷

17. When the Government published the baseline data for the indicators in December 1999 it stated “In future, decisions on policies and priorities will benefit from an objective analysis of the recent trends and current position for each headline indicator. The assessment needs to look at both whether the headline indicators are moving “in the right direction over time” and “whether a satisfactory level has been reached”. The report acknowledged that determining whether a satisfactory level had been reached required a more subjective judgement.¹⁸

18. The subjective nature of this judgement is not made explicit in the 2001 report. The reader is presented with some key trends in conjunction with the traffic light assessment and left to guess at the judgement leap between them. In particular, the report, and previous supporting documents relating to the indicator,¹⁹ do not state what constitutes “significant” in terms of moving away or towards the desired objective. We can see no evidence that a particular statistical rule is being applied but if this is the case it should be made clear.

19. Statistics are open to a variety of interpretations. The traffic light markings have an even greater element of subjectivity. The judgement linking the data presented and the “traffic light” assessment awarded is not explicit. We recommend that in future each headline indicator assessment be accompanied by a short justification of that marking and that future reports state clearly what constitutes “significant change” in awarding the assessments.

20. Mr Meacher acknowledged that there was a “degree of subjectivity” in deciding whether an indicator should be marked as red, amber or green and that it was very difficult “to decide, in a logical and utterly rational way”.²⁰ However, he was confident that the Government was marking itself fairly and not over-generously and that there was no need for an independent body to award the traffic light assessments to avoid a conflict of interests. He was keen to stress that the GSS was “an independent branch of Government...it does belong to Government...but it is not an area where Ministers interfere, and if they tried to interfere they would not succeed”.²¹

21. We note that at European level there is a clearer distinction between the assessors and the assessed in relation to indicators. For example, the European Environment Agency,²² in conjunction with Eurostat,²³ provides annual indicator assessments of progress on environmental aspects of sustainable development for the Commission.²⁴ These bodies will

¹⁷ Ev19, para 4.

¹⁸ *Quality of life counts, Indicators for a strategy for sustainable development for the United Kingdom: a baseline assessment*, DETR, December 1999, paras 3.6-3.8.

¹⁹ For example, *Quality of life counts-Indicators for a strategy for sustainable development for the United Kingdom: a baseline assessment*, DETR, December 1999.

²⁰ Q7.

²¹ Q96.

²² The European Environment Agency was established by the EU in 1990 (operational in 1994) to provide Community institutions and Member States with the objective, reliable and comparable information to frame and implement sound and effective environmental policies. The Agency aims to support sustainable development and to help achieve significant and measurable improvement in Europe’s environment through the provision of timely, targeted, relevant and reliable information to policy-making agents and the public. The EEA is the hub of the European environment information and observation network (EIONET), a network of some 600 bodies across Europe through which it both collects and disseminates environment-related data and information.

²³ Eurostat is the Statistical Office of the European Communities. It consolidates data provided by Member States and thereby seeks to supply comparable statistical information at European level. Eurostat’s key role is to supply statistics to the Commission and other European institutions so that they can define, implement and analyse Community policies.

²⁴ For example, see the *Environmental Signals* series and annual Transport and Environment Reporting Mechanism (TERM) report.

also have a key role in making future assessments relating to the indicators supporting the EU Sustainable Development Strategy.²⁵

22. In the UK, the guarantee of independence is less obvious. This lays the Government's assessments open to claims of partiality, in the absence of any third party validation. Such validation has been employed in other Government reports—for example the annual greening operations reports of the Department of Environment, Transport and the Regions included validation statements by independent consultants.²⁶ Mr Meacher cited the Environmental Audit Committee (EAC) itself as a body which could hold the Government to account on the indicators. He felt that we “made it difficult for the Government to be generous to itself” as it was aware that we would insist that such decisions would have to be justified.²⁷ We hope so. The amendments to the presentation of the barometer since our meeting with Mr Meacher certainly indicate this to be the case.

23. We agree that we have our part to play in holding the Government to account in this area. However, it is not our place, nor possible for us, to provide the thorough, professional and regular auditing that is required to “check” the indicator assessments. This is partly because we do not have the resources and partly because it is not our role to undertake such detailed analysis for a specific issue on a routine basis. Although, this work would be possible if the Government agreed to the establishment of an Environmental Auditor General within the National Audit Office (NAO) as we have previously recommended.²⁸

24. The Government also looks to the Sustainable Development Commission to offer advice on how the indicators can be improved.²⁹ The indicators are core to a number of the Commission's objectives relating to the review of UK progress on sustainable development and the identification of unsustainable trends.³⁰ The Commission has not conducted any particular studies on the indicators since it was officially launched by the Prime Minister in October 2000. However, a study was conducted by one of its precursors, the Round Table on Sustainable Development.³¹

25. Third party validation of the Government's “traffic light” indicator assessments is necessary to neutralise unfounded claims of partiality which could themselves undermine the credibility of the indicators. Such validation could be achieved by the use of independent consultants. Alternatively, the Government's annual report on the headline indicators could include a statement from the Sustainable Development Commission outlining how far it agreed with the Government's assessments.

²⁵ Com (2001) 264 final, *A Sustainable Europe for a Better World: A European Union Strategy for Sustainable Development*, 15 May 2001.

²⁶ See *Greening Operations: Annual Report (1998/99)*, DETR, 28 January 2000.

²⁷ Q79.

²⁸ First Report of the House of Commons Environmental Audit Committee (Session 2000-01), *Environmental Audit: The First Parliament*, HC 67-I, para 146. The NAO already audits the Budget assumptions and in future will be auditing the data systems which underpin individual Government's reporting of their performance against Public Service Agreements.

²⁹ *Quality of life counts - Indicators for a strategy for sustainable development for the United Kingdom: a baseline assessment*, December 1999, para 1.14.

³⁰ The Sustainable Development Commission's (SCD) objectives include: a) reviewing how far sustainable development is being achieved in the UK in all relevant fields, and identifying any relevant processes or policies which may be undermining this; b) identifying important unsustainable trends which will not be reversed on the basis of current or planned action, and recommending action to reverse the trends.

³¹ However, one of its precursors, the UK Round Table on Sustainable Development reported on the indicator system as set out in *Quality of Life Counts* in June 2000 and highlighted particular areas which it suggested the new Commission needed to keep under review. See *Indicators of Sustainable Development*, UK Round Table on Sustainable Development, 22 June 2000.

Media Coverage

26. **The launch of the 2001 barometer and related DEFRA press release³² led to some unfortunate media coverage which did little to advance the Government's cause in entrenching the headline indicators in the public psyche as clear and trusted signals of the UK's progress towards the Government's sustainable development goals.**

27. The DEFRA press release relating to the barometer opened with the assertion that "Life in Britain is getting a lot better though there is room for improvement in some areas..."³³ At the launch of the annual report and barometer findings, Mr Meacher was understandably reluctant to sign-up to the simplified sound bite that "Life in Britain is a lot better..." based on the mixed picture offered by the 2001 barometer. Some of the press presented this as Mr Meacher dissenting from DEFRA's "upbeat" assessment of the latest barometer findings.³⁴ Some went further to suggest that Mr Meacher would not sign up to Downing Street's gloss on the DEFRA press release.³⁵ This undermined the credibility of the barometer.

28. The media coverage also somewhat muddled the distinction between the 2001 barometer (based on the Government's assessment of statistical trends) and the 2001 Survey of Public Attitudes towards the Environment and Quality of Life (based on people's own opinions). This confusion partly stemmed from DEFRA's own press release for the barometer which also highlighted elements of the Public Attitudes Survey. The latter showed that four out of five people regard their "quality of life" as fairly or very good—a finding which the Government was obviously keen to convey to the media.

29. The indicator reporting mechanism is still in its infancy and at this early stage it is particularly important that the core messages of the annual report are presented as clearly and carefully as possible to establish the profile of the indicators. **We recommend that DEFRA's Communications Strategy for the 2003 report on the headline indicators reviews media coverage of the previous annual reports and considers how future presentation can minimise past pitfalls.**

Specific Indicators

30. In the following pages we consider some of the headline indicators in detail. We have concentrated on the environmental indicators and those where we have found particular cause for concern. These are: waste, transport and climate change.

31. We have not commented on the other environmental indicators—air quality, water quality or wildlife as these are either displaying positive trends (air and water quality) or the Government has acknowledged unacceptable trends and is committed to putting in place policies to counteract them (wildlife).³⁶

Waste (H15)

32. Waste is arguably second only to climate change in terms of the UK's environmental challenges. It is also an issue that has significant resonance with the public as it affects daily lives.

³² DEFRA News Release 98/02, *UK quality of life barometer rises-Meacher*, 13 March 2002.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ For example, *The Times*, *We're all happier now, says Labour-or are we?* 14 March 2002.

³⁵ *Daily Mail*, *Life's better under Labour? That's rubbish says Meacher*, 14 March 2002.

³⁶ See Q 27-29. The Government acknowledges that intensive farming practices are likely to be the main reason for the decline in farmland and woodland birds over recent decades. Mr Meacher told us that the Government was seeking to reverse these practices to restore these bird populations to previous levels.

33. The Government's overall objective for waste is to "move away from disposal of waste towards waste reduction, reuse, recycling and recovery".³⁷ Using our resources more efficiently is a key requirement if the UK is to move further towards sustainable development. Thus, waste arisings and management is one of the fifteen headline indicators (H15) and progress is measured in terms of total "waste arisings and management" including waste from households, industry and commerce.

34. At present there is insufficient comparable data for the waste headline indicator. Thus, no traffic light assessment for the "since the Strategy" period is provided in the 2001 report. DEFRA and the Environmental Agency are currently considering plans for a survey of industrial and commercial waste, likely to be in 2002/3, which will allow a full update of the indicator³⁸ but not until 2003/4. The barometer will therefore record "no data" for the next three years. This omission may be an accurate reflection of the statistical situation but it gives the public no idea of the present situation relating to this important area of concern and certainly not the "at a glance" barometer that the headline indicators should provide. However, a glance at the trend since 1990, marked as red, would indicate that all is not as it should be.

35. The Government is certainly in no doubt that waste trends are heading resolutely in the wrong direction and that new policies are required, hence the organisation of the "Waste Summit" earlier this year and the commissioning of a report on waste from the Performance and Innovation Unit (PIU), to be published later this summer. **Mr Meacher was keen to reassure us that the lack of data provision was not an attempt by the Government to mask the poor trends in waste arisings and management. He told us "Let me make this absolutely clear, waste is a problem area, it is a red area..."**³⁹ We agree.

36. The waste data comes from a variety of surveys undertaken by a range of organisations including DEFRA, DTLR and the devolved administrations. DEFRA told us that the frequency of collection reflects the likely degree of change from year to year and that it was important to establish a balance between meeting policy, planning and other reporting needs and the costs and burdens to respondents of collecting the data. Complete data for the headline indicator does exist for 1997/98 but as yet there is no comparator against which to judge recent trends. At present, industrial and commercial waste is only measured every 5 years; Mr Meacher acknowledged that the Government should consider whether that should become more frequent.⁴⁰ We agree.

37. Conversely, information on municipal waste⁴¹ is available annually from a survey of local authorities.⁴² It is estimated that there were 28.2 million tonnes of municipal waste in 2000/01 in England—roughly 15% of the 170–210 million tonnes of total UK waste arisings. Only 21% of municipal waste had some sort of value recovered from it in 2000/01 (ie by recycling, composting or energy from waste) and only 11.2% of the household waste was recycled in this period.⁴³ This is a far cry from the Government's targets to recover value from 40% of municipal waste and to recycle or compost 25% of household waste by 2005.⁴⁴

³⁷ *Quality of life counts: Indicators for a strategy for sustainable development for the United Kingdom: a baseline assessment*, The Government Statistical Service, December 1999.

³⁸ Ev20, para 8.

³⁹ Q41.

⁴⁰ Q49.

⁴¹ Municipal waste includes household waste and commercial waste collected by local authorities. Household waste includes waste from civic amenity sites, recycling schemes and street sweeping.

⁴² DEFRA News Release (Statistical Release) 148/02, *Municipal Waste Management Statistics 2000/01*, 16 April 2002.

⁴³ *Ibid.* Note these figures are England only.

⁴⁴ Waste Strategy 2000: England and Wales, DETR, May 2000.

38. We agree that *total* waste arisings should form the basis of the headline waste indicator. However, we are concerned that due to the lack of regular data, the waste headline indicator in the annual report will record “no comparable data” for the next three years and even after that, new data is only likely to become available every 2–3 years depending on the future requirements of proposed EU regulations on Waste Statistics. The Government’s own Waste Strategy is only due to be reviewed every five years.⁴⁵ In this case, a presentation of the latest information which *is* available would seem appropriate with a clear explanation that this is necessary due to the lack of complete data relating to total waste arisings.

39. There is recent data available for the municipal waste stream. It may only represent a small proportion of the waste challenge, and not tell the whole waste story, but it has particular resonance with the public and is to be included as one of the indicators to support the EU Sustainable Development Strategy.⁴⁶ We considered whether municipal waste/all waste streams might be a useful split for the indicator. Household waste is only a component of the municipal waste data which is collected annually—household sources made up around 89% of the municipal waste stream in 2000/01—and therefore the municipal waste figures actually represent a greater component of total waste arisings. However, household waste is already a core indicator (A5) and therefore a household waste/all waste streams split is logical. Either split would allow up-to-date waste information to feature regularly on the quality of life barometer without compromising the “statistical purity” of the time series data for the headline indicator.

40. Mr Meacher acknowledged that it would be possible to have “a double indicator” splitting household and commercial waste.⁴⁷ There is a precedent for such a split as both the crime and wildlife indicators have been split to present the data more helpfully. Mr Meacher undertook to look at the possibility of a split waste indicator in the light of our discussions.⁴⁸ **We note that the updated, June 2002 barometer includes a newly split indicator which awards a “traffic light” assessment for household waste (red) and all waste streams (no comparable data). We welcome Mr Meacher’s action in response to our concerns. This will make recent trends in waste arisings clearer to the public. However, in future, the public may actually find the split confusing when *municipal waste* rather than *household waste* is reported as an indicator at EU level. The Government should consider how it will guard against this situation.**

Transport (H11)

41. Road traffic is one of the fastest growing contributors to greenhouse gas emissions which cause climate change. It contributes to local air pollution which has a public health impact. In recent decades, traffic growth has been closely associated with the underlying rate of economic growth and traffic congestion itself has an economic cost. These environmental, social and economic impacts secure road traffic’s inclusion as one of the headline indicators, H11. This is measured in terms of vehicle miles per year.

42. Mr Meacher confirmed that the headline indicator had been set up to respond to a decline in the *rate of growth*, not an *overall reduction* in vehicle miles. Even with the measures included in the Government’s ten year transport plan,⁴⁹ traffic growth is expected to increase by 17% by 2010.⁵⁰ However, most people reading the report or glancing at the headline “barometer” will assume that the indicator shows whether road traffic is increasing

⁴⁵ Ev20, para 8.

⁴⁶ Q121.

⁴⁷ Q60.

⁴⁸ Q60.

⁴⁹ *Transport 2010-The 10 Year Plan*, DETR, 20 July 2000.

⁵⁰ *Transport 2010: Background Analysis*, DETR, July 2000, Fig 13.

or not. Many will bring to mind Mr Prescott's widely reported assertion,⁵¹ which he now disclaims,⁵² that in 1997 that the Government would have failed if car use had not gone down within five years. In the foreword to the Integrated Transport White Paper, Mr Prescott stated "We have had to make hard choices on how to combat congestion and pollution while persuading people to use their cars a little less - and public transport a little more".⁵³

43. The 2001 annual report on the headline indicators assesses the transport indicator as no change (amber) - both since 1990 and since the Strategy. Mr Meacher claimed that this was a fair assessment because the rate of traffic growth was sharply reducing⁵⁴ —a significant change but one which could not be presented as either a success or a failure.⁵⁵ Road traffic has increased by 134% since 1970, 14% since 1990 and 4% since the Strategy in 1999. Road traffic increased by 0.7% in 2000 (adjusted to account for the fuel protest), significantly less than in previous times of strong economic growth⁵⁶ whilst provisional figures for 2000–1 show that traffic has increased by 1.2%.⁵⁷

44. If the traffic indicator were awarded a "green light" this would not indicate an absolute reduction in vehicle miles but a slower rate of growth. The report does not conceal this vital distinction but nor is it explicit in the presentation of this indicator. It should be. This potential for confusion underlines the need to clearly set out objectives against indicators.

45. The policy objective which is linked to the headline transport indicator is "to improve choice in transport; improve access to education, jobs, leisure and services; and reduce the need to travel".⁵⁸ It makes no mention of reducing traffic growth and the Government has declined to set a national road traffic reduction target for England and Wales. The targets which the Government uses to assess its performance against its ten year transport plan, have been adapted to reduce the adverse impacts of traffic rather than traffic levels themselves (in England and Wales). The Government has identified the two most important indicators of the adverse impacts of traffic to be congestion and pollution.⁵⁹ However, the House of Commons Transport, Local Government and the Regions Committee recently criticised the Government for not setting a target related to traffic levels or traffic growth whilst maintaining a target for reducing congestion. That Committee concluded that as a result, the ten year plan failed to take account of the impact of greater traffic on quality of life, network reliability, and safety.⁶⁰

46. The rate of traffic growth is an appropriate indicator for the overall progress of Government transport policy. The Government expects the package of measures in the 10 year transport plan to reduce traffic growth, although this is not an explicit aim, therefore performance can be judged against this indicator. However, the lack of specific Government targets relating to traffic growth or traffic levels does not give

⁵¹ For example, *The Guardian* reported that Mr Prescott made this claim at a conference at the Royal Geographical Society on 6 June 1997. This pledge was reiterated in a parliamentary exchange with Tom Brake MP in 1998. See HC Hansard c 1071 20 October 1998.

⁵² John Prescott, *You can't drive motorists off the road. You can drive them to their senses*, *The Independent* on Sunday, 9 June 2002.

⁵³ *A new deal for transport: Better for Everyone*, DETR, 20 July 1998.

⁵⁴ Q4.

⁵⁵ Q16.

⁵⁶ *Achieving a better quality of life: Review of progress towards sustainable development, Government Annual Report 2001*, DEFRA, March 2002, para 3.47.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ *Quality of Life Counts-Indicators for a strategy for sustainable development for the United Kingdom: a baseline assessment*, DETR, December 1999, p 39.

⁵⁹ *Tackling Congestion and Pollution: The Government's first report under the Road Traffic Reduction (National Targets) Act 1998*, DETR, January 2000.

⁶⁰ Session 2001-02, Eighth report of the House of Commons Transport, Local Government and the Regions Committee, *10 Year Plan for Transport*, HC 558-I, para 30.

us confidence that the transport headline indicator forms the intended feedback necessary to inform policy decisions. The Government should explain why it is content to use the rate of traffic growth as a headline indicator but is unwilling to have any specific targets relating to traffic levels or traffic growth.

Climate change (H9)

47. The climate change headline indicator measures the whole basket of greenhouse gases.⁶¹ The 2001 barometer gives the indicator a “green” for both the trend displayed since 1990 and the Strategy. This is a fair assessment—emissions of the “basket” of six greenhouse gases have fallen by 13% between the 1990 baseline and 2000. The UK’s Kyoto greenhouse gas target is to achieve a 12% reduction below 1990 levels by 2008–2012 so the UK has already exceeded this target and the Government expects its climate change programme⁶² to achieve a reduction in greenhouse gas emissions of 23% below 1990 levels by 2010.

48. In 1999, UK emissions of greenhouse gases fell by 6.4%—the largest yearly fall since 1990.⁶³ **DEFRA’s latest data shows that the decrease in greenhouse gases has levelled off,⁶⁴ while carbon dioxide (the main greenhouse gas) emissions actually increased in both 2000 and 2001.⁶⁵** We highlighted this increase in our session with Mr Meacher.⁶⁶ who argued that the increased emissions were a result of the rise in oil and in particular gas prices, which may have caused a temporary switch-back in the electricity market to increased coal burn. He was doubtful that it would last.⁶⁷

49. The 2001 report explains that “year to year fluctuations in the individual indicators—in the right and wrong directions—are to be expected, even when the long term trend is acceptable”.⁶⁸ The worrying “blip” in the latest trends in greenhouse gas emissions is worthy of note but is not acknowledged and explained in the text accompanying H9 in the annual report. It should be. However, we are pleased to see that the recent increase in carbon dioxide emissions (2000–1) is acknowledged in the updated June 2002 barometer.⁶⁹

50. The simple green light for this indicator in the absence of an explanation in the headline indicator summary has the potential to lead to confusion over meaning and scepticism over objectivity. We accept that short-term fluctuations in trends are to be expected and should not be allowed to skew the “traffic light” assessments of long-term indicators. They should, however, be acknowledged and explained in the report.

Geographical Coverage

51. The indicators have been designed to cover the major issues facing the UK. Only nine of the fifteen headline indicators however are actually based on UK data. Three use data relating the Great Britain and a further three use data from England or England and Wales. DEFRA argue that this is because “in some cases data or long-term trends are not available or not comparable between all constituent countries”. Mr Meacher agreed with

⁶¹ Carbon dioxide, methane, nitrous oxide, hydrofluorocarbons, perfluorocarbons and sulphur hexafluoride.

⁶² Climate Change: The UK Programme, DETR, November 2000.

⁶³ *Achieving a better quality of life: Review of progress towards sustainable development - Government annual report 2002*, DEFRA, March 2002, p 68.

⁶⁴ According to DEFRA’s underlying data available at www.sustainable-development.gov.uk, UK emissions of the basket of greenhouse gases fell by 5.2 % in the period 1998/9 but increased by 0.2 % in the period 1999/2000.

⁶⁵ According to DEFRA’s underlying data available at www.sustainable-development.gov.uk, carbon dioxide emissions rose by 0.9 % in the period 1999/2000 and by 1.5% in the period 2000/2001.

⁶⁶ QQ 81–85.

⁶⁷ Q81.

⁶⁸ *Achieving a better quality of life: Review of progress towards sustainable development, Government Annual Report 2001*, DEFRA, March 2002, para 3.11.

⁶⁹ Paras 3.43-3.44.

us that it would be “much better” if the data behind each indicator reflected performance over the same geographical area.⁷⁰ This was clearly the original aim. The 1998 consultation on the indicators, *Sustainability Counts*, states “*The coverage will need to be extended in due course to the whole of the United Kingdom if [the indicators] are to be adopted as part of the definitive set of indicators.*”⁷¹ **We recommend that the Government clarify how it is seeking to achieve a uniform geographic basis across all the headline indicators.**

52. DEFRA sought to reassure us that the traffic light assessments for 2001 would remain largely unchanged even if all of the headline indicators had been based on UK-wide data, arguing that in all cases, trends would predominantly be affected by factors seen in the constituent countries already covered by the indicator and would not be significantly affected by the relatively small proportion of the population or number of dwellings not reflected in the existing data.⁷² We are, however, not at all reassured. Environmental standards, such as air quality, or renewable electricity generation can vary greatly between localities. The fact that environmental issues and sustainable development aims are a devolved matter confirms this and may lead to greater variations in the future.

53. The Scottish Executive and National Assembly for Wales recently published their own sets of indicators and the Northern Ireland Executive is consulting on its set.⁷³ Mr Steve Hall, a statistician from the Environment Protection Statistics and Information Management department at DEFRA, confirmed that DEFRA was liaising with the devolved administrations and that “they were very much looking to the UK indicators as a model to provide consistency across the nation”.⁷⁴ Table 1, included in DEFRA’s memorandum to the Committee provides helpful comparisons of the indicator sets developed by each country.⁷⁵ The devolved administrations cannot be required to evaluate or assess their sustainable development indicators in the same way as the UK Government. However, there is mutual benefit from doing so. **We encourage the UK Government to continue to work collaboratively with the devolved administrations in developing comparable indicator reporting systems. We believe that in the absence of a standardised UK view, any summary assessments of the indicators from the devolved administrations should be included as annexes in future UK annual review reports.**

⁷⁰ Q62.

⁷¹ *Sustainability Counts*, DETR, November 1998, para 9.1.

⁷² Ev18, para 1 c).

⁷³ See *Sustainable Development Indicators for Wales 2002 - Statistical Bulletin SB 36/2002*, March 2002, and *Meeting the Needs ... Priorities, Actions and Targets for Sustainable Development in Scotland, Paper 2002/14*, Scottish Executive, April 2002.

⁷⁴ Q65.

⁷⁵ Ev22.

Conclusion

54. **The Government's overall "ten out of fifteen" (66.6 per cent) score is somewhat selective.** Two of the ten positive scores (crime and wildlife) are subdivided and give mixed signals. This leaves eight. Of these, five are in the economic and social category. We have not commented on these though we will do so in future. Of the three in the environmental area, one is climate change and, as indicated above (paras 44 and 45), there are some worrying signals here. **One could just as easily present the 2001 assessments as showing that only two of the seven environmental indicators (28.6 per cent) are showing clear progress, the rest (71.4 per cent) being to some degree unsatisfactory.**

55. The quality of life barometer is the Government's key tool to engage the public with the sustainable development indicators. The data therefore needs to be as clear and complete as possible within good statistical practice. Data gaps in the headline "barometer" are not conducive to providing the public with indicators which they can understand and trust or the "at a glance" assessment of progress which the Government hopes will generate as much interest as the economic indicators. **Where data is unavailable for a headline indicator in a particular year we agree that this should be marked as "incomparable data". However we recommend that, in such cases, the Government should consider providing an additional "proxy" traffic light assessment which indicates the Government's "best guess" at whether the indicator is on a sustainable track.**

56. **The Government must ensure that appropriate data is collected. Given that the 15 headline indicators were established in 1999, we are surprised and disappointed that there is still insufficient data in some areas to provide a complete picture.**

57. We support the Government's system of sustainable development indicators and the related reporting mechanism—in particular the "quality of life barometer" which can be a powerful communication tool and one which we wish to see used to its full potential. However, we have observed some worrying absences of data (particularly in relation to waste) and weaknesses in presentation of the barometer (e.g. the confusing transport indicator and lack of information relating to short term trends) which threaten to undermine its impact and credibility. The system would be more robust if the indicator assessments were subject to third party review.

58. Our examination of the 2001 Quality of Life barometer leaves us with the impression that we are moving, albeit rather sluggishly, along the sustainable development track but not equally across all elements of the sustainable development (economic, social and environmental). **The barometer clearly shows the environmental element of sustainable development to be the "Cinderella" of the three with little indication of how this situation is being tackled. The Government needs to demonstrate strongly its commitment to take action if trends are heading in the wrong direction so that we all can see evidence that the Government is managing and not just measuring.**

Annex 1

Table 1: Development of the sustainable development indicators

1996	<i>Indicators of Sustainable Development for the United Kingdom</i> , DETR,	First set of indicators (120) published
Nov 1998	Sustainability Counts, DETR	Government consulted on 13 possible headline indicators and conducted research via focus groups. As a result of this work Mr Meacher told us that a “level of crime” indicator was added and the social investment indicator was extended to include investment in all assets. ⁷⁶
May 1999	<i>A Better Quality of Life: A Strategy for sustainable development in the UK</i> , DETR	UK Sustainable Development Strategy set out the key issues and priorities at a national scale. It included a core set of around 150 indicators of sustainable development with a sub-set of 15 headline indicators, and a commitment to reporting against them on an annual basis.
Dec 1999	<i>Quality of Life Counts: Indicators for a Strategy for sustainable development for the UK: a baseline assessment</i> , DETR	Historical data was provided in areas covered by the core set of indicators of sustainable development to provide a baseline for measuring future progress.
Jul 2000	<i>Local Quality of Life Counts: A handbook for a menu of local indicators for sustainable development</i> , DETR	This handbook intended to offer some ideas for measuring sustainable development and quality of life in local communities.
Dec 2000	<i>Regional Quality of Life Counts: Regional versions of the national “headline indicators of sustainable development</i> , DETR	A statistical publication to present the available regional data for each headline indicator and to make this information more readily available at regional and local levels.
Jan 2001	<i>Achieving a better quality of life: Review of progress towards sustainable development. Government Annual Report 2000.</i>	The first review of progress in the UK towards sustainable development, as measured against the 1999 baseline data. It was intended to meet the commitment to report annually made in <i>A Better Quality of Life (May 1999)</i> .
Mar 2002	<i>Achieving a better quality of life: Review of progress towards sustainable development. Government Annual Report 2001</i>	The second report reviewing UK progress towards sustainable development, as measured against the baseline data provided in December 1999.

⁷⁶ Q66.

Annex 2

Table 2: Progress of UK Headline Sustainable Development Indicators

Indicator	Government Annual Report 2000		Government Annual Report 2001	
	Change 1990-99	Change over last year	Change since 1990	Change since strategy
<i>Economic</i>				
Economic output	✓	✓	✓	✓
Investment	✗	✓	✗	✓
Employment	—	✓	—	✓
<i>Social</i>				
Poverty & social exclusion	—	✓	—	✓
Education	✓	✓	✓	✓
Health	—	—	—	—
Housing	—	(no new data)	—	(no data)
Crime: violent	✗	✗	✗	✗
Crime: vehicle, burglary	✓	✓	✓	✓
<i>Environment</i>				
Climate change	✓	—	✓	✓
Air quality	✓	✗	✓	✓
Road traffic	—	—	—	—
River water quality	✓	✓	✓	✓
Wildlife	✗	✓	✗	— (farmland) ✓ (woodland)
Land use	—	—	—	—
Waste	✗ (household) no data (other)	(no new data)	✗	(no data)

Key: ✓ Significant change in direction of meeting objective
 — No significant change
 ✗ Significant change in direction away from meeting objective

Notes:

1. The table summarises the “traffic light” indicators included in the Government’s annual reports on progress towards sustainable development.
2. The Government Annual Report 2000, *Achieving a better quality of life: Review of progress towards sustainable development*, was published by the DETR in January 2001. See Table 3.2 pages 37–38.
3. The Government Annual Report 2001, *Achieving a better quality of life: Review of progress towards sustainable development*, was published by DEFRA in March 2002. See Figure 3.1 pages 53–56.

Annex 3

Table 3 : Departmental Responsibilities for Headline Indicators

HEADLINE INDICATOR		DEPARTMENT
H1	Total Output of the Economy	ONS/HMT
H2	Investment	ONS/HMT
H3	Employment	ONS/DWP/HMT
H4	Poverty and Social Exclusion	DWP
H5	Education	DfES
H6	Health	ONS/DoH
H7	Housing	DTLR
H8	Crime	Home Office
H9	Climate Change	DEFRA, NETCEN
H10	Air Quality	DEFRA, NETCEN
H11	Road Traffic	DTLR
H12	River Water Quality	Environment Agency, SEPA, EHS
H13	Wildlife	DEFRA (RSPB, BTO)
H14	Land Use	DTLR
H15	Waste	DEFRA

Key

ONS	Office of National Statistics
HMT	Her Majesty's Treasury
DWP	Department of Work and Pensions
DfES	Department for Education and Skills
DoH	Department of Health
DTLR	Department of Transport, Local Government and the Regions
DEFRA	Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs
NETCEN	National Environment Technology Centre
SEPA	Scottish Environment Protection Agency
EHS	Environment and Heritage Service (Northern Ireland)
RSPB	Royal Society for the Protection of Birds
BTO	British Trust for Ornithology

Source: DEFRA, May 2002.

PROCEEDINGS OF THE COMMITTEE RELATING TO THE REPORT

WEDNESDAY 3 JULY 2002

Members present:

Mr John Horam, in the Chair

Mr Harold Best
Mr Colin Challen
Sue Doughty
Mr Mark Francois
Mr Ian Lucas

Mr Malcolm Savidge
Mr Simon Thomas
Joan Walley
Mr David Wright

The Committee deliberated.

Draft Report [Measuring the Quality of Life: The 2001 Sustainable Development Headline Indicators], proposed by the Chairman, brought up and read.

Ordered, That the draft Report be read a second time, paragraph by paragraph.

Paragraphs 1 to 58 read and agreed to.

Annexes 1 to 3 read and agreed to.

Resolved, That the Report be the Fourth Report of the Committee to the House.

Ordered, That the Chairman do make the Report to the House.

Ordered, That the provisions of Standing Order No. 134 (Select Committees (reports)) be applied to the Report.

[Adjourned till Wednesday 10 July at Four o'clock.]

LIST OF WITNESSES

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Wednesday 8 May 2002

**DEPARTMENT FOR ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS
(DEFRA)**

Rt Hon Michael Meacher, a Member of the House,
Minister of State for Environment, Mr John Adams, Head of the
Sustainable Development Unit, and Mr Stephen Hall,
Statistician, Environment Protection Statistics and Information (EPSIM),
Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Ev 1

APPENDIX TO THE MINUTES OF EVIDENCE

Memorandum from

The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Ev 18

MINUTES OF EVIDENCE

TAKEN BEFORE THE ENVIRONMENTAL AUDIT COMMITTEE

WEDNESDAY 8 MAY 2002

Members present:

Mr John Horam, in the Chair

Mr Gregory Barker
Mr Colin Challen
Mrs Helen Clark
Sue Doughty
Mr Mark Francois
Mr Neil Gerrard

Mr Jon Owen Jones
Ian Lucas
Mr Malcolm Savidge
Mr Simon Thomas
Joan Walley

Examination of Witnesses

RT HON MICHAEL MEACHER, a Member of the House, Minister of State (Environment), MR JOHN ADAMS, Head of the Sustainable Development Unit, and MR STEPHEN HALL, Statistician, Environment Protection Statistics and Information Management (EPSIM), Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA), examined.

Chairman

Mrs Clark

1. Good afternoon, Minister. Thank you for coming along. I gather we may be interrupted by a vote, which would be extremely inconvenient if it occurred, but I will recess the meeting for a quarter of an hour if that does occur, and we do not know whether it will occur or not. I think this is the first time we have actually had a discussion about the headline indicators, am I right?

(Mr Meacher) I think it is, yes; with me, anyway.

2. Yes, with you. I think we have had discussions about their origin and how they are set out, but we have not had a discussion, and this is the second annual report we are discussing.¹ And, for convenience, we are working off this rather nice little popular version, which you use, which should be easily understood, but we think it is misleading, in some respects, but, there we are. Can we start, unless you have anything you would like to add?

(Mr Meacher) No. I do not know whether you want me to introduce my colleagues.

3. Yes, that would be nice.

(Mr Meacher) John Adams, who is Head of the Sustainable Development Unit, and Stephen Hall, who is Environmental Protection Statistics.

Chairman: Good; thank you very much indeed. And we want to start off by just looking at some of the individual headline indicators, concentrating particularly on the environmental ones, although, obviously, as we both know, the indicators are wider than that. But we would like to concentrate on the environmental ones at this particular meeting, since we do not have a huge amount of time. I know Mrs Clark wants to start off, on road traffic.

4. I certainly want to talk about road traffic, I had not quite realised I was starting off on it, but I am delighted to do so. And I would like to take the Minister straight away to this neat little guide to progress, etc., etc., and to the section on road traffic, and to the squiggle that says "no significant change." On page 70-71 of the report, you say that road traffic vehicle miles are still on the increase, although the overall rate of increase in traffic is, in fact, lower than in previous periods. Well, Minister, why not just say so, why not say, "There has been a slow increase," etc., rather than no significant increase, because, in fact, there has been an increase, however slow, has there not?

(Mr Meacher) There has, that is perfectly true, but the rate of increase has very substantially reduced; how exactly that is represented, in terms of red, amber, green, is a matter of judgement. I think what we have done is right. The increase in road traffic since 1970 has been 134 per cent, the report makes this clear; since 1990, 14 per cent; and since Strategy in 1999, 4 per cent; and within that period the increase in road traffic has actually slowed below the rate of economic growth. In 2000-01, it was 1.2 per cent. It is still an increase but it is hugely less an increase than we have seen in the last two decades, and I think it is fair to describe it in the way we have; after all, the aim is to reduce the rate of growth, and that is very sharply reducing.

5. So, really, you are telling us today that, as long as the rate of increase in vehicle miles is actually reducing, this will stay the same, there will be no significant change, you will use the same indicator?

(Mr Meacher) Of course, it depends what the figures actually show. I am not saying how we might characterise in future; and, given the degree to which the rate of increase is slowing, I suppose it is not so impossible that we will see in future years that it actually does marginally decrease, that would certainly be agreed.

¹ Achieving a better quality of life, Review of progress towards sustainable development, Government annual report 2001, March 2002.

8 May 2002]

RT HON MICHAEL MEACHER MP, MR JOHN ADAMS
AND MR STEPHEN HALL

[Continued

Sue Doughty

6. But, Minister, surely, this goes out to the public, they can see the graph going up, and, yes, we are very pleased it is going up less fast, but increase is not the same as rate of increase, and if we are talking about increase we should be saying it has increased, albeit less slowly. People have these things for information at a glance, they do not go into the finer points and say, "They are adjusted for economic factors, and, yes, it is rising less fast;" the fact is it is still rising. Because one of the things, I think, that the public have found very difficult with this Government is that, having in 1997 come in and said, "We are going to reduce road traffic then we are going to reduce the rate of increase and then . . ." there is a certain amount of cynicism. And I quite accept that you are making efforts in this direction, but I think the public are right to be cynical when figures are presented in that way and being told, "Ah, well, the rate of increase is less;" okay, it is, but, I think, present them in this way, comment that the rate of increase is there, and that they are rising, and that is what you have not said in your piece?

(*Mr Meacher*) It depends what the objective is, and we were quite honest and clear about this, it was to reduce the rate of growth, when we compiled these statistics. We did not say, "We are going to characterise the change on the basis of whether there was an increase, or the same, or a decrease," we said that "It will be based on reducing the rate of growth." Now maybe you think that is not understood by the public, that may be true; all that I can say is that we have not tried to conceal that. Given the problems, namely, given society's love of the motorcar, and the increased use of the motorcar by increasing sections of the population, that is a realistic objective, whereas a decrease, in an absolute sense, is not one that is readily going to be achieved. Given the slowing of the rate of increase, it is possible that we will get there, but we did make clear, as I say, that the first objective must be to reduce the rate of growth, and that has happened.

7. But what we are talking about is increase, and we are saying it is stable, which it is not, it is increasing. I understand the point about how to present these, about whether we are actually talking about rate of increase or the actual increase, and I appreciate that you have changed the basis although continuing to describe it as increase, not rate of increase. But surely we are playing 'follow the focus group', if we start doing this and then we record it in that way, instead of saying to the public, who are fairly grown up, I agree with you that it is difficult to get them out of their cars and onto other transport, particularly when other transport is not being provided, but if you say to them, "Well, we're not even going to show clearly that traffic is still increasing," that is the fact; what you do about whether it is the rate of increase or how you deal with that is a different matter, but, the fact is, traffic is still increasing. And that is the thing that we need to be continuing to present to the public, for them to make decisions about their role within that, or to make demands upon the Government to do something about it, whether it is an increase in public transport or whatever it is?

(*Mr Meacher*) All I can say is, we have made no attempt to conceal the fact that it is increasing, that is unquestionably true, that is what the facts do show. And we are not suggesting that this scores green, we are not making a positive thing out of this, we are simply saying it is an amber; and I think it is fair to describe it as an amber, given the figures that I have quoted, there is a dramatic change. I am not sure I can take it further. You have made your point and I do understand it, and it is a perfectly fair point. I hope you will accept the points that I am making are perfectly fair. Like so many of these headline indicators, it is the way in which one looks at them, and, I absolutely agree, one needs great care in looking at indicators and statistics, because what you are saying is true and what I am saying is true.

Ian Lucas

8. These are quality of life indicators, are they not, and they must therefore be related to the public's perception of quality of life; would you agree?

(*Mr Meacher*) Absolutely, and there has been quite a lot of work done on quality of life, and for the first time the 2001 *Survey of Public Attitudes towards the Environment* included questions on the quality of life. I am not sure how you are going to follow it up. I can certainly give the details.

9. Perhaps if I continue. In that case, if the public perceive that, for example, the traffic situation is deteriorating then should that not be a red on the indicator?

(*Mr Meacher*) You say the public perceives that; the question is, if that is true, you are just asserting it, I am not sure where the evidence for that is, and the real facts are, even if the public perceives that, is that the case. And if you look at the figures, again, we are back to the point that there is an increase, but it is a very small increase, and the rate of increase has been decreasing. Now I doubt if the public perceives that as a red.

10. The evidence, Minister, is the fact that the public generally perceive the traffic situation as not being acceptable, and the amount of traffic is increasing, therefore, the situation is deteriorating; is that not correct?

(*Mr Meacher*) You are making assumptions—

11. With respect, I am not making assumptions. I am referring to the figures that you are presenting. You are saying that the amount of traffic is increasing still; that is correct, is it not?

(*Mr Meacher*) By 1.2 per cent in the last year.

12. And would you accept that the public do not regard the present traffic situation as acceptable?

(*Mr Meacher*) I think many people who are pedestrians and who live near roads believe that traffic volumes are high, and almost certainly, in most cases, higher than they would like, even though many of them will also be car users and actually be contributing to that.

13. I accept that, but it is right, is it not, that the amount of traffic is still increasing?

(*Mr Meacher*) I have said that that is so.

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[Ian Lucas Cont]

14. Therefore, is it not an inevitable conclusion that the position is deteriorating rather than staying the same?

(*Mr Meacher*) I think we are having the same kind of arguments I had with Mrs Doughty. I am not denying that there has been an increase, it is a small increase, I doubt if it is one which is subjectively perceived by the public; the real problem for the public is that they do believe, I am sure, many of them, most of us, probably, believe that traffic volumes are higher, and higher than we would like. And it is certainly true that it is marginally continuing to creep up, and that is not satisfactory, I entirely agree, but it is also true that the trend, a long-term trend, and, more recently, the very recent trend, is going absolutely in the right direction, in the way that the public would like. And if you take both of those factors together, I do not think it is unfair to regard this as an amber rather than a red. But what you are really illustrating is, it is very difficult, with all of these things, to decide, in a logical and utterly rational way, whether it should be green, amber or red, there is a degree of subjectivity; those who are perhaps hostile to the Government would incline towards a rather harsher view.

15. I am not hostile to the Government, I am a Labour Member. What I am suggesting is that these figures have to retain credibility in the public mind, and, in my view, to say that an increase in traffic is, if we describe amber as, satisfactory would not correspond with the public perception of the situation?

(*Mr Meacher*) I agree, amber is not satisfactory, amber is not satisfactory, absolutely; we want there to be 15 greens, in the sense that there has been a change in the situation which justifies scoring green in every case. Now, at the moment, it is ten, which is, I think, pretty good. We did not choose these indicators, they have not been chosen by Government to get the result we want, they were chosen as a result of intense sampling of the population, use of focus groups, etc., so it is their indices, not ours. Now, if we get ten out of 15, I think that is pretty good, but we still do need the remainder; and, in fact, I think it is 12, is it not, 12 out of 15, three are reds.

Mr Francois

16. Minister, I came directly from another meeting, so I apologise if I was a few minutes late; no discourtesy meant on my part for a moment. I think it is almost five years to the day that John Prescott famously said, "If car use has not gone down within five years, we will have failed," and he also added to that "and I expect you to hold me to that." Well, here we are, five years on, and it has gone up; so that is red, is it not, that is bang-to-right, surely?

(*Mr Meacher*) Well, what John Prescott was hoping for has not happened, that is a matter of fact. But, I repeat, there has been a change, and there has been a change for the better, in the sense that the rate of increase has markedly slowed, and I just do not think you can deny that. We are not saying it is perfect, we are not saying a success, we are not making claims that this is an area in which the Government has dramatically succeeded, we have

not, it is a very, very difficult area. You have started on probably the single most difficult area, I totally understand that, it is totally proper; it is a very difficult area for any Government to influence the attitudes of people, given the immense flexibility, manoeuvrability and convenience of the car, it is very difficult. But there has been a significant change, and I think that that can only fairly be represented not as a success, not as a failure, but as an amber.

17. Minister, you said, a couple of minutes ago, that people are hostile to the Government.

(*Mr Meacher*) I did not mean any particular Member, let me make that very clear.

18. No, no, absolutely not, but your point was that people who were perhaps hostile to the Government might perceive this as a failure, but the Deputy Prime Minister, and you can argue whether he is hostile to the Government or not, but he is actually a member of it, and quite a senior one too, and he actually said, he set the bar that we are all judging you against, and he said it very clearly, he used quite direct language, quite deliberately, he said, "You judge me in five years, and if we haven't done it I expect to be held to it." And that, I think, is what this Committee are doing, and you have failed?

(*Mr Meacher*) Okay, you make your point, and I am sure John Prescott would accept that. He, like probably all of us, underestimated how difficult it is to make this change. There has been a change. I repeat again, it has not been yet as far and as fast as he anticipated.

Mr Challen

19. I just wanted to ask, you have answered part of my question, which was about whether it was a success or not; but, just looking behind the indicators, how would you account for the slightly decreasing upward growth in the last four years, is it anything that the Government has done, or is it down to things like fuel protesters, and whatnot?

(*Mr Meacher*) It is certainly not down to the fuel protesters. There are changes which have been made in policy, which have begun to affect this. First of all, I think there is much greater awareness, in terms of a contribution to climate change, and the single biggest impact of transport towards the climate change figures; now how far that actually translates into behaviour of individual drivers, I think it does, for a minority, but it is probably not yet very widespread. There has been much emphasis in every Budget on greenhouse gas emissions, VED measures, according to size of engine and generation of greenhouse gases, there has been a great deal of discussion on the very contentious topic of congestion charging; all of these, I think, have begun to influence what happens on the ground. I would like to think that ministerial exhortations to shorter journeys, fewer journeys and use public transport or walk had some effect, I suspect they have probably had rather little effect. I was referring, of course, to evenings and weekends.

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[Continued

Chairman

20. I thought you were referring to the demonstration effect?

(*Mr Meacher*) And, before you ask the question, Mr Chairman, I do try to abide by that myself, in a small way. I do think that congestion charging, which is an option, and certainly likely to be exercised in London, and maybe elsewhere, will certainly begin to have an impact. But I think there is a much greater readiness to understand that this is a problem, and I would think there are 20, 30 per cent perhaps of the population who are very sensitive to these matters and do try to reflect it in their own behaviour.

Mr Barker

21. I think we have exhausted this last five years pretty comprehensively; we are all agreed that it was a lot more difficult than you anticipated, and the Government has failed. But, the next five years, if, in five years' time, and now you know the score, these indicators are still either static or rising very moderately, will you have failed and will we be able to hold you to it?

(*Mr Meacher*) Perhaps I could take you back to your earlier premise. We are all agreed that it has proved more difficult than, I think, any of us anticipated. I do not think the Government has failed, I think we have only partially succeeded; that is a rather different way of putting it. I do think, I insist, that there has been a change, and that is some partial success; and, I think, in the light of that experience, it would be very unwise for any Minister, or any Government, to make prognostications of where we are going to be in five years. We intend to intensify these pressures, as I have just indicated to Mr Challen, and I do anticipate that those will increasingly bite; but whether it bites sufficiently to get a reduction, an overall reduction, in five years, I am not making that prediction, but I do not think that that is impossible.

22. So how should the public, the electorate, look to hold you to account, what measurable indicator can they look to, to actually hold you to account, so you have, in layman's language, succeeded or failed, in the simple argot of John Prescott?

(*Mr Meacher*) That is a matter for the public, is it not, it is not a matter for Government to lay down; and we are very concerned, what does the electorate feel about this, what are their views about what they would like the traffic situation to be. As I say, most people, if not virtually everyone, would like traffic to be less; the question is, are they willing to make their contribution to it, in order to ensure that everyone makes a contribution to it. Now I am not sure what the public's attitude is, I think it is very mixed, I think it is very ambiguous. So it is not for the Government to set a target and then say, "Well, we're being held to it," it is for the electorate, I think, to take a view, to which we will be very sensitive, I can assure you.

Mr Savidge

23. You have partly answered my question, in your response to Mr Challen, which is, what further policies do you have for trying to actually reduce traffic; you have mentioned congestion charging, any other issues that you would like to raise?

(*Mr Meacher*) Yes. I have mentioned these, so I will not repeat them, but the other one which I think is quite important is air quality. We have a commitment to statutory application of air quality targets in 2005, now only three years away, and let me make clear what that means. There are eight main air pollutants, and each local authority in the country is required to ensure that it, within its own territory, remains below the ceiling level for each of those pollutants. Now, of course, some of them, particularly NOx and PM10s, which are associated with transport, are often very difficult, in very heavily-used roads, near intersections, centres of cities, and local authorities have now been required to examine such hot spots, as they are called, in order to determine whether it is necessary to have an air quality management area designated, and action taken by the local authority, and which it will determine what that is, in order to bring the level of pollution of each of those pollutants below the threshold level. Now that is also going to lead to change, it may lead to change in traffic configuration, possibly road architecture, it is for the local authority to decide, but I think this will influence the pattern of traffic, both its speed and its volume.

24. Just on specifically the traffic-related matter of air pollution, because I suspect we will be talking about air pollution further later on, how far do you think the news today, of the possibility of producing petrol which will contain a mixture of biological products with oil, does that possibly give a way forward for reducing air pollution from traffic?

(*Mr Meacher*) That will certainly have an impact on traffic pollution, and indeed I think there will be a major change in the next five, ten years in that respect, as we move towards hybrid vehicles; which, of course, can be produced now, it is all a question of recharging, and the redesigning of vehicles in order to take the necessary tanks, and, of course, questions of cost. But the big change, of course, is as we move towards the hydrogen fuel-cell car, and I know no more than anyone else about when that is going to happen, but I would certainly anticipate that it will be in commercial use within ten, 15 years.

Chairman

25. A long way off, I think?

(*Mr Meacher*) Ten, 15 years, if that is a long way off, yes.

Mr Savidge

26. Do you think Government could take more steps, either fiscal or otherwise, to actually encourage that process?

(*Mr Meacher*) Well, as we are all trained to say, that is a matter for the Chancellor, and it is one on which, of course, we give him advice; but it is his decision.

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[Mr Savidge Cont]

Chairman: We want to move on to some other indicators, I think, after discussing that, which has had a rather lengthy exposure. I know Mr Gerrard wants to come in here.

Mr Gerrard

27. Can we move on to the wildlife indicator, which is the population of wild birds. In the report, you have shown a small decrease again in farmland species but an improvement in woodland; but if we look at it long term, certainly if you look back over a couple of decades, there is a very serious decline in both. How clear are you as to the actual causes of that, and what needs to be done to start turning it round?

(*Mr Meacher*) I think we are pretty clear as to some of the reasons, and, probably, the main reasons, whether we yet understand all the main reasons I would be less sure. Certainly, intensification of agriculture is unquestionably the main one, and that is reflected in, for example, the reduction in field margins, the destruction of hedgerows, the switch from spring to autumn sowing and, of course, extensive use of pesticides, as well as fertilisers. Now all of those, directly or indirectly, impact on bird survival.

28. How far do we know that level of affect on individual species? These are collective data here, for quite a large number of species, I think, if one looks at the 'all species' figure, not woodland or farmland; but there has certainly been a very significant change in London, say, over the last 20 years, where probably the most common birds you see now in gardens in London are pigeons and magpies, rather than the sorts of birds that were there 15, 20 years ago?

(*Mr Meacher*) Of course, it is significant that, whilst there has been a reduction in both types of species, the reduction in farmland is dramatically more; the reduction in woodland birds since 1970 is about 15 per cent, in the case of farmland it is 43 per cent. And that, I think, simply reflects the factors that I have referred to, intensified agriculture and all that goes with it; and it is the reversal of those practices which will steadily, we believe, restore the populations towards where they were.

29. Do you think that we really will significantly reverse those trends on intensified agriculture, if that is the answer?

(*Mr Meacher*) Again, we are at a very early stage in a switch away from the most intense stages of the Common Agricultural Policy. Last year, as these figures show, there was a 9 per cent increase in woodland species, and about level, in other words, no further drop, in farmland species. Now what are the policies behind that; an increased shift towards the second pillar of the Agricultural Policy, away from subsidised production towards agri-environment, there has been a quite significant shift towards organic, it has happened all across Europe, it is happening even faster here, and has certainly been very much supported by Government support subsidy as well. Modulation, which was introduced by the previous Minister for Agriculture, from 2 to 4½ per cent; a modest but significant change compared

with past trends, and one of which, of course, the Curry Commission, which is probably the single most important instrument, has recommended should increase substantially further. And, indeed, the Curry report on sustainable agriculture, 'Commission on Food and Farming', as it is called, really seeks to reverse a lot of these trends; and, I can assure you, the Government takes very careful note of the Curry report, we have yet to set out our proposals, but we are certainly impressed by that report and are keen to see much of it implemented.

30. You say in the report that in future you are going to look at both trends, farmland and woodland populations, which was not initially the case. Was there a reason not to separate those indicators initially and just have the one?

(*Mr Meacher*) For those who were engaged in the statistics before my time, I think it is because we did not appreciate the differentiation between these types of species at the outset, and it became clear that there was a clear and major dividing line, and almost certainly related to causation; so I think that was why the change was made.

(*Mr Adams*) Having put both lines on the same graph, we are then faced, if they are going in different directions, with the requirement either to compromise as to what the story is or to say that the story is different as between the two, and that was what we decided to do this year.

31. Can I ask about two other specific indicators, the two that, in the small table that is being handed out, since the strategy, are both shown as "insufficient or no comparable data"; the obvious one, perhaps, first of all, waste, which is a key area, one where we are expecting, according to Government targets, very significant change over the next eight years to meet targets for 2010. Why is it that we have not got the systematic monitoring to give us the data we want?

(*Mr Meacher*) I think it is because, of course, we have got it now, but we did not have it, I think, in 1990; is that correct?

(*Mr Adams*) I think what has happened here is that we deliberately chose an indicator for all waste streams, but we do not have equally good data for all waste streams; we have reasonably good data for household waste and we can track that year by year, but we will not have, for another year, or so, another comprehensive set of data to set alongside that.

Chairman

32. But is it not household waste which matters, because that is the one which causes the problem?

(*Mr Adams*) Household waste is only a minority of them.

33. I know, but it matters, does it not? Municipal waste, collection of waste from homes, is the one that is significant; the others, commercial waste, industrial waste, are more handleable?

(*Mr Meacher*) They are more handleable; it is important to look at the quantification of this. I think it is about 120 million, 130 million tonnes a year, of which—

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34. But it is smaller, but it is the problem; it is the problem, and we know that it is going up by 3 or 4 per cent a year. So why is it not in here, that is what we are saying?

(*Mr Meacher*) What you are saying is, why have we not looked extensively at household waste.

35. Not put the figure in here?

(*Mr Meacher*) We could have done, I quite agree, but it would be an odd thing to do. I think the level is about 28 million tonnes, currently, and if you look at it with commercial and industrial waste it is around 130; it would be odd to concentrate on one-fifth of the total.

36. I do not think so, because it is the problem. The other is between large organisations, which, by and large, can sort it out?

(*Mr Meacher*) The question is, have they, and do they, and are they.

37. Maybe they are not either, but, nonetheless, it seems strange, when we all know waste is a problem getting worse, to have no figures in here, to say there is no data, when clearly there is; that strikes us as extraordinary?

(*Mr Adams*) There are data for household waste, which are published separately, and we are not trying to hide or disguise those. This is the indicator for waste we chose three years ago. Now there is an interesting discussion to be had as to whether that was an appropriate choice to have made.

38. Maybe, in the case of birds, you should change the indicator there?

(*Mr Adams*) We have not changed the indicator, we merely split the analysis in terms of the tick and the cross, but we are quite reluctant to change the indicators, because one of the benefits of a time series is that people can see what is going on.

Chairman: But this is not telling us anything, because you say you have no data, so there is no information.

Mr Gerrard

39. When will we have the answer to this question, when will we have the data?

(*Mr Adams*) In 2003–04, we will have new data on a basis on which we can update what is in the Strategy.

40. And how far back will we be able to compare then, where have you started actually collecting the new data from?

(*Mr Meacher*) From the Strategy, 1999.

(*Mr Hall*) I think it will be just a snapshot of a year or so ago.

41. So it is not possible now to show us what has happened since 1999?

(*Mr Meacher*) Let me make it absolutely clear, waste is a problem area, it is a red area, and this is not a device to evade that fact; it is simply saying that, on the statistical comparisons which we believe are right and proper, we do not have the necessary data going back to the period since the Strategy.

Mr Francois: On this point about municipal waste, Minister, it is the Government's own Environment Agency that have told this Committee, very clearly,—

Chairman: We will have to suspend for a quarter of an hour, until 5.15, we will come back at 5.15.

The Committee suspended from 4.57 pm to 5.12 pm for a division in the House.

Chairman: Minister, we have got a quorum, so if you would not mind starting three minutes earlier than I indicated, because we have got your questioner here as well. So perhaps Mr Francois could carry on with the question he was so rudely interrupted on.

Mr Francois

42. Minister, we were talking about waste and the configuration of the waste headline indicator. The point I was seeking to make was, following on from what the Chairman was saying, it is the Environment Agency that have stressed to us, as a Committee, on a number of occasions, that the principal problem, in terms of waste, is household/municipal waste. So I think the reason why we are emphasising this is because your own environmental experts, in the Agency, have repeated this to us, and therefore I think it is fairly legitimate for us to repeat it back to you; they are saying it is the key problem, so surely it should be separately identified?

(*Mr Meacher*) There is an argument to that effect; we could do that. However, with great respect to the Environment Agency, and I have a lot of respect for them, that is not the definitive judgement, it is really what the public feels, and I do think that overall levels of waste are, actually, in my mind, in the end, what matters most. I am very concerned about household waste, it is going still too much in the wrong direction; if it were separately identified here it would be a red. And it needs to be changed, and is being changed, and I can spell out the policies by which we intend to do that. But we have, I think, rightly, taken account of industrial and commercial waste streams as being five or six times more, because I think that is the key factor; and, the truth is, the data on which to base a comparison of change since 1999 is not available on that basis. So I am totally open about waste, it is an area within my direct responsibility which is not going the right way; we need new policies, which are now being implemented, and we may have to have further policies still. But, in terms of recycling, statutory targets, in terms of money which is being put into this area, in terms of the creation of markets for recyclates, through WRAP, the right policies are there and these policies will change.

Chairman

43. It is admirable that you want to measure the whole waste stream, I agree, but when will you be able to do that, 2003, 2004?

(*Mr Meacher*) Yes; it is not an annual—

44. It is not annual?

(*Mr Meacher*) Not, it is not; that is why it will be 2003, 2004.

45. 2003 or 2004, you are not sure about that?

(*Mr Meacher*) In the financial year 2003–04.

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[Chairman Cont]

46. But, also, that does mean that we will have no comparator for two years after that, will we, because you have no comparator now?

(*Mr Meacher*) But that is a comparator, is it not?

(*Mr Hall*) It will be a comparator with the figures that we had at the time of the Strategy, but then there will be, again,—

47. But you have no figures now, let us just establish the point. You have no figures now for this total waste stream, no figures now, so the first figure you will have will be 2003–04, right, so that will become the comparator?

(*Mr Meacher*) I thought that was not the case. In 1999, which is when the final column derives from, we did not then have data for the whole waste stream, including industrial and commercial waste. We have, for, which year, 1997–98, but we have not got a comparator with 1997–98.

48. But that is rather amazing, is it not; you could measure the whole waste stream in 1997–1998, we have not been able to measure it since then and we will not be able to do so until 2003–04?

(*Mr Meacher*) It surprises me, too, but the industrial and commercial waste is not measured on an annual basis, it is measured every five years, in effect.

49. Every five years; so really we will not have a measure of the waste stream until once every quinquennial?

(*Mr Meacher*) In effect, that is right. But, before you ask the question, I think we should consider whether that should be more frequent.

Mr Savidge

50. Why was the five-year period adopted?

(*Mr Hall*) I do not know. I think basically it is very expensive and difficult information to collect, and so it cannot be done on a very frequent basis.

Mr Challen

51. I am a bit lost here to understand why we do not have this information. I used to sit on a local authority, in Surrey, in 1986, and at that time we did have various directions from Government, and our own thoughts on the subject added to it, about how to recycle more, and do all that sort of thing, and the stuff was measured. And what does it say about local authorities adopting Agenda 21, that was ten years ago and there were lots of things about waste, if I recall correctly. Would it not even have been, given what you have said, a better idea at least to put the domestic waste in somehow; there must be figures, and if there are not figures then it is a staggering omission on everybody's part?

(*Mr Meacher*) I repeat that municipal waste, which is measured on an annual basis, certainly in terms of the statutory targets to which we are holding local authorities now, will certainly be monitored very carefully on an annual basis. What we are talking about here though is industrial and commercial waste, and the first time that was measured was 1997–98, that was the first time it was measured; one can argue about why that did not happen before, but it was the first time it happened, it was not happening

in the 1980s. Again, one can argue that we should have access to that data more frequently than once every five years, but Government does have to take into account the cost. I have not got the costings.

Chairman

52. But I think the public would be understanding, if, in the meantime, you said “It’s very expensive to collect all this information, other than once every five years,” or perhaps occasionally more often, but at quite long intervals, “in the meantime we will publish figures on municipal waste,” in the meantime, explaining quite frankly and openly why you are doing this?

(*Mr Meacher*) We could do that.

53. Can I suggest that to the Government then?

(*Mr Meacher*) I am not opposed to that, except that it is only a small part of the total picture.

Chairman: I accept that, but, nonetheless, it is better than no information.

Mr Challen

54. Yes; and, every five years, of course, there used to be a recession every five years?

(*Mr Meacher*) The question is whether it is better to have more information about a small part of the problem or less frequent information about the whole of it; you take your choice and you pay your money.

Mr Savidge

55. But do you have to take a choice; surely, why can we not have a situation where we have the municipal figures every year, and once every five years we have the municipal figures together with the commercial waste and together with the total figure? That seems to me to be fairly obvious sense, if you are saying municipal waste can be fairly easily measured; is that not something the Government could consider?

(*Mr Meacher*) Those are exactly the figures that are available and which are published.

Chairman

56. Not here?

(*Mr Meacher*) The only issue is, when you are looking for 15 headline indicators and you have got one index, only one way of publishing the data, the question is, which is the best way to do it; and you, the general Committee, are saying we should concentrate on household waste to the exclusion of the whole picture, I am saying it is better to concentrate on the whole picture, even if less frequently.

Ian Lucas

57. If I can just refer to the leaflet and the headline indicators that are set out there, there are two specific splits between, in the crime and the wildlife indicators, and you could quite easily have a waste indicator saying commercial waste and household

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waste, and the information could quite easily be supplied in exactly the same format as we see for crime and wildlife there, and that would give the public more information than they have from the indicator at present. Would not that be an improvement?

(*Mr Meacher*) It may well be, and I am happy to consider that. As I say, the figures are available, they are published, but, in terms of having it on this particular diagram, if it is useful, if you, the Committee, and the public would find that helpful, I certainly think we should consider that seriously.

Mr Gerrard

58. On the figures, how are the figures actually collected on the commercial waste, because, looking at what you have quoted here for 1997–98, which was the first time it was done, the figure that is quoted is between 170 and 210 million tonnes; that is a huge range?

(*Mr Meacher*) Can either of my colleagues help me on how that figure is collected?

(*Mr Hall*) It is only collected on a survey basis, so there are margins of error in the results from the survey.

59. It looks like very significant margins of error, between 170 and 210 million tonnes, that is nearly 25 per cent of the lower figure, the top figure, and then we are setting targets about reducing landfill for industrial and commercial waste by fairly precise percentages, and one wonders how we are actually going to know whether we are hitting those targets, if the variation is so large?

(*Mr Meacher*) Sampling does have a margin of error, and obviously it depends on the size of the sample, and that depends on cost as well. But the magnitude, even if it is quite wide, I accept that, I think what the public are interested in, I am sure the Committee is interested in, is a quantification of the rough magnitude, compared with the household stream, which is just under 30 million tonnes a year.

Mr Francois

60. Two points here, quickly. I served on a local authority too, like Mr Challen; the data is there to take a pretty accurate annual measurement of municipal waste. And I would humbly suggest, I think, along with other colleagues on the Committee, that basing your waste indicator on a figure that comes out only once every five years and is subject to a 25 per cent margin of error, in terms of collection of the data, is perhaps, to coin a phrase, sub-optimal?

(*Mr Meacher*) It depends whether you are interested in precise quantification of a small part of the problem, or whether we should try to improve the quantification of the whole problem so that we have a general understanding of the real, total problem as it really is. But I do take the point, we do not have to make a choice between the two. As in other cases, as Members have pointed out, one could have a double indicator which includes both, and, as I say, in the light of today's discussions, I think we should look at that quite seriously.

Mr Thomas

61. I want to raise a wider question about the reliability of these headline indicators. We have looked at waste in some detail, birds, in particular at traffic, and the Committee is examining the gap between the public perception and the stated successes, or otherwise, in these barometer figures. What strikes me is that, of these 15 indicators, only nine are true UK indicators, six of them are indicators for other parts of Great Britain, two are indicators just for England, one, crime, is an indicator for England and Wales, and one, on poverty and social exclusion, is a mix of indicators from England and Great Britain. How reliable are these as UK indicators?

(*Mr Meacher*) They are reliable as UK indicators to the extent to which the areas covered are a proportion of the UK; and if you are making the point, and I think you are, that we should have a standardised basis for all of these statistics, again, I am sympathetic to that. A lot depends, again, on exactly what the issue is and how it is measured; particularly since we now have devolution, some of these may be measured differently by the devolved administrations, that is what makes it difficult. We cannot, nor, I am sure you would agree, should we, force on the devolved administrations a particular way of evaluating or assessing one of these issues when they would prefer to use a different one.

62. I totally agree with you on that matter, of course, but I would suggest, nevertheless, that the information and the figures are probably available. If we take, for example, housing, the household figure, 'households in non-decent housing', which is one of these lack of information figures, it is an England-only figure. I cannot believe there is not a Welsh figure for households in non-decent housing, I cannot believe there is not a Scottish figure or a Northern Ireland figure; there must be a way of collecting these figures and working them out on a UK basis. And though I would not, for a moment, suggest that you force the devolved administrations to report on these matters, I think the statistics must be there, buried somewhere, and surely there must be found a way to bring these out, so that, yes, there should be reporting at the devolved level as well, and, as you know, for example, there is in Wales a very clear Sustainable Development Strategy and reporting to the Welsh population on that. Different indicators again have been worked out, perhaps. But, nevertheless, if these are truly UK figures, I suggest six out of 15 is falling fairly short of a true UK picture?

(*Mr Meacher*) That is a very fair question, and it is a very detailed question. Can I suggest, Mr Chairman, it might be helpful if I were to supply, in respect of the other nine, an explanation as to why it is not UK figures, or what are the problems in making it a UK figure, and it will, of course, prompt us to look very carefully at just how far we can get a standardised UK view, which, I agree, will be much better.

63. Can I invite you, either now or in that note, to look as to whether, if those extra six were UK figures, whether you would have different indicators, whether you would arrive at a different green, amber

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or red marker for those? Now some of the problems, what you might be suggesting here is those figures may be difficult to get to, but that might suggest that if, for example, housing or crime was a genuine UK figure, and because it is difficult to get a genuine UK, all the statistics together, many of these, rather than greens, might have turned out to be insufficient data, and that would not look so good, would it?

(Mr Meacher) You are making a supposition there.

64. Yes, I am inviting you to give us information to disprove that supposition?

(Mr Meacher) I do not believe for a second that we decided to do this on a country-by-country basis in order to get the right results. I think there are other, good, solid, genuine statistical reasons why this has happened, and I would prefer to examine in each case exactly what those reasons were. We will let you have that information, and, in the light of that, you can pursue your second hypothesis, that it might have something to do with the results. I do not believe it does.

Mr Savidge

65. Has there been any consultation with the devolved Parliaments, or the devolved Assemblies, about the possibility of trying to see if we can have some sort of co-ordination of indicators, without, obviously, in any way wanting to undermine devolution, or might that be something you would consider for the future, which has not been done so far?

(Mr Meacher) Mr Hall is whispering an answer. I think he should probably give it direct to the Committee.

(Mr Hall) The Scottish administration and the Welsh Assembly have very recently produced their own set of indicators, very much looking at what is being done for the UK picture, and there is some consistency in the way they develop their indicators, and we are in consultation with our colleagues in those administrations.

Mr Jones

66. I want to ask some questions about the indicators relating to greenhouse gases, but before I do I just want to clarify some points which have left me a little confused, and I am sure you can clarify for us, Minister. In answer to, I think, my colleague Sue Doughty, you stated that "We didn't choose these indices," and yet Mr Adams answered, I think it was, Mr Gerrard, or Mr Francois, about waste, he explained "why we chose this way of measuring waste." So I am confused. Who chose the indicators?

(Mr Meacher) I think what we were referring to was why waste is there at all. What happened was that the Government launched a consultation on the proposals for 13 indicators in November of 1998, we received more than 650 written responses, there was also a certain amount of research conducted via focus groups; as a result of that, we added an indicator about the level of crime and we also extended the social investment indicator to include investment in all assets.

67. So the answer is, the Government chose the indicators in consultation?

(Mr Meacher) Yes.

68. So halfway between what you have said and Mr Adams said?

(Mr Meacher) It is true we did not go to people and say, "We're thinking of having a dozen, 15 indicators, what do you think they should be?" We proposed what we thought was an appropriate list, but then, very open-endedly, invited the public to comment, not just in a short face-to-face but to think about it and write to us, if they wanted to, saying whether or not they agreed with these, whether they should be modified, whether they should be dropped, or others added.

69. Then, when you set these indices, or targets, did you set them with the intention of them all being met, or did you set them with the intention of them being challenging targets, indices, objectives?

(Mr Meacher) They were set on the basis of what would be a reasonably manageable set of indicators which would indicate the degree to which the country was or was not moving towards sustainable development, that was the basis of it. We wanted to check whether they were acceptable as being important to people, and, indeed, in the *Survey of Public Attitudes*—

70. The question was, were they meant to be challenging?

(Mr Meacher) They were not chosen to be challenging or unchallenging, they were chosen to be indicators of whether or not we were moving towards sustainable development. Now, inasmuch as I think almost everyone agrees that we have not had a society or an economy or an environment which is sustainable, it does need change in all parts of society, and to that extent they are challenging.

71. Minister, I am not trying to catch you out, what I am trying to get to is, if you set indices, whoever sets them, the objectives that you are going to measure your performance by, then would you not agree that any reasonable person would conclude, on 15 indices, or whatever number, that if they are at all challenging then it must imply that it is likely that you are not going to meet all of them?

(Mr Meacher) I think that is a reasonable supposition.

72. I wish you had answered my colleague Mr Barker a bit more honestly and more forthrightly and said, well, of course, you are bound to set some indices which we will fail at, otherwise, if you only set indices which we can succeed at then what is the point?

(Mr Meacher) I am grateful for your assistance in responding to some of your colleagues. That is quite a robust answer, and I think it does show that these are indices, or they are indicators, which are, in some respects, quite tough. We asked people what was important, or very important, to them, and the ones chosen meet those criteria for the overwhelming majority of those asked; and, indeed, people will choose things where they want to see change, and some of those changes will be difficult to achieve because of in-bred practices in society, the economy, or in environmental practice.

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73. Or even deficiencies in the Government's will?
(Mr Meacher) It could be; not in this one, but it could be.

74. I was not suggesting it was, but there is a whole range of reasons why things are not achieved, we should admit that. I think that clarifies a bit how the indices were reached. What about the process by which the indices are marked, how we judge whether this has been reached or not, and that is entirely a Government thing?

(Mr Meacher) Yes.

75. Do you think there would be any merit in any outside body doing the marking?

(Mr Meacher) If, as perhaps you are implying, Government has such an in-built incentive to mark itself generously, I suppose I see the point of your question.

76. There will be other alternatives; it may be a little bit more credible, or saleable, if it is judged by some outside body than to present information which is judged by the body which presents it?

(Mr Meacher) We are judged by an outside body, or a body that holds us to account, which is the EAC, and it is precisely this kind of lengthy and detailed interrogation which, I think, rightly, makes it difficult for Government to be generous to itself; it has got to be able to justify what it decides.

77. I am glad you mentioned that, because the point I was hopeful to draw you towards was, would it not be a useful function of this Committee to do that judging, to do that marking; after all, it has got the title Environmental Audit Committee, why do you not set us the task of auditing your progress on these matters?

(Mr Meacher) But you are, that is exactly what you are doing today.

78. We should be marking you.

(Mr Meacher) But you are.

79. No, no; we are marking your marks. I may or may not speak for the Committee, but I think it would be better if we actually marked your progress, not marked your marks?

(Mr Meacher) You are not saying mark progress, you are saying that you would be—it is subjective, whoever does it, whether Government does it, a Committee does it, whoever does it, there is a degree of subjectivity about this; and you are saying it should be a select committee rather than the Government itself who assess the evidence and then decides on the marking. Then, of course, we will be down to issues like, well, what is the composition of the committee, how politically-loaded is it, is it entirely fair, what have the Whips had to do with it.

Chairman: Minister, if the Government had accepted the Bill that we put forward, which established an Environmental Commissioner, then you have an entirely independent body like the Comptroller and Auditor General, who deals with taxation and revenue-raising, who could provide us with the facts, which we would then debate openly, as we are today?

Mr Jones

80. You have answered me by saying that we are not a perfect body, we are not, of course, but we have the merit of not being exactly the same body as the body that draws up the report, and there is merit in that?

(Mr Meacher) You have made the point, and I do understand it, and I am quite prepared to take it away and look at it further. I think it would have more force if you, in your deliberations today, were able to indicate that the Government had exercised this prerogative we have in a clearly unfair way, then I think there would be grounds for change. I do not really think that is the case; but you make a point. I am all in favour of objectivity and independence and transparency, and you have made a point, and I will look at it.

81. I am meant to be asking about greenhouse gases, so I will try to be specific now. This is another tick area, and yet in recent years there has been a considerable increase in the amount of electricity generated in this country from coal-fired power stations, and, mainly because of that, an increase in the last couple of years of the main greenhouse gas, carbon dioxide, and yet we have a tick?

(Mr Meacher) That is perfectly true, and it is because of the rise in the price of oil, in particular, and gas, there has been within the market a probably temporary switch back to some increased coal burn. I think it is doubtful if that will last. But the real point here is that, if you look at the trend over a long period of time, and not just a very short period, the trend has been a very good one. There has been a 14 per cent reduction in greenhouse gases since 1990, and our statisticians calculate that, on the basis of existing policies, we should reach around 23 per cent reduction by 2010; and if one is just concerned with CO₂ alone, a reduction of around 19 per cent, when we set ourselves a domestic target of 20 per cent. So those are all dramatically good results, when you also bear in mind that there are only three countries in Europe—

82. But they are not results, Minister; you cannot claim that what will possibly happen in 2010 is a result?

(Mr Meacher) What has happened up to now is a fact, and that is a 14 per cent reduction. You are quite right that the continuation of that trend is a hypothesis, you are quite right.

83. What we have had in the last couple of years is an increase in the main greenhouse gas producers, across the board, in the United Kingdom. If we did not have the benefit, and I am not going to say, you are expecting me to say, the benefit of the 'dash for gas' but I am not going to say that, I am going to say, if we had not had the benefit of the effect of the greenhouse, i.e. our temperatures have got warmer, average British temperatures have gone up fairly considerably in the last decade, corrected for that, our CO₂ production has not declined from 1993?

(Mr Meacher) I would need to look at the figures for that. You are making a fair point.

84. Your colleague, Brian Wilson, has commented on those figures, we have seen them, and he said: "For anyone who might have grown complacent,

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these figures demand that we must do more to address our environmental obligations." I am sure you would agree with that?

(Mr Meacher) I do.

85. But the point that he is also making there, about complacency, these published results would show the tick; surely that just feeds complacency?

(Mr Meacher) I would deny that. I think there has been an improvement, certainly it is a long-term improvement, since 1990, but also since 1999, which justifies it in both columns, and it is not just closure of coal-powered stations and 'dash for gas'; that has been a significant factor, that is perfectly true. There has been, we go back to a reduction in the rate of growth of traffic volumes, there has been a significant improvement in energy efficiency, which is continuing, for a variety of factors; there is now beginning to be an increase in the use of renewables and CHP. All of those are at an incipient stage, but they are quite influential, and they will become more so over the next decade. So I think that record is unquestionably a good one. I have not come here to crow or be triumphalist, and I am sure you will not let me be, but I do think the UK has a very good record on climate change; now it is not to say we have not got to go a lot further, but if we could drag every other country in Europe, let alone in Annex 1 countries, the industrialised countries, up to our level, we would be motoring, that is the wrong metaphor, in this respect, we would be walking with our head high.

86. Yes, but it is not our remit to look at other countries' performance; although we may compare them with our countries, not all the comparisons are as glowing as you have given there. Looking at what we might practically do to reduce CO₂, it has been suggested to us that the part-loading of plant, as a result of NETA, is one factor leading to increased emissions; do you agree with that?

(Mr Meacher) The effect of NETA, the New Electricity Trading Arrangements, has certainly had side-effects, certainly unintended, and unfortunate side-effects, with regard to small generators, particularly renewables and CHP. We have begun to try to reverse those, by the Chancellor, in his most recent Budget, extending CHP for full exemption from the Climate Change Levy, including sales to licensed suppliers, which was not previously the case. We are providing Enhanced Capital Allowances, and we are about to publish a CHP Strategy, which will re-endorse our commitment to the achievement of 10,000 megawatts CHP by 2010. There is, of course, already, and I again confirm it, a Renewables Obligation of 10 per cent of all energy, for electricity generation from renewable sources by 2010.

87. But that target, the 2010 renewable target, do you think we are going to meet any of the interim targets on that before the next general election?

(Mr Meacher) There is talk about whether there should be an interim target of 2005.

88. There is a 2003 target?

(Mr Meacher) Well 2003 is only one year away.

89. We have already been told we are not going to get there, by the Energy Minister?

(Mr Meacher) There is not an interim target for 2003; there is a question as to whether there should be an interim target. But I can assure you that these matters are monitored month by month, let alone year by year, and it is true that, in terms of development of renewables, we are behind, and it is true, in terms of CHP, we are not on track for 10,000 megawatts; that is the need for new policies.

90. If they are monitored month by month, why is it that we cannot get any figures for last year?

(Mr Meacher) Last year, for what?

91. For the CO₂ production; we cannot get 2001 figures, we have not even got 2000 renewable?

(Mr Meacher) I was referring to CHP and renewables generation of electricity.

Mr Francois

92. Just following on from my colleague's point, that is a curious assertion, Minister, because when we had the Energy Minister in front of us we asked him whether or not we were generating more electricity from renewables or less, and he told us that that data will not be available until this summer, to look back over the past year; and you are just now telling us that these figures are monitored on a monthly basis. So which one of the two Ministers is correct?

(Mr Meacher) Less than when; you said "less than", less than when, what period are you looking at, in terms of comparison?

93. Let me explain. There is the 10 per cent target for 2010; we were told that, 18 months ago, we were at 2.8 per cent of renewable energy, the bulk of which was from hydro, if I remember correctly. And we said "What is the figure in the year just gone?" and we were then told, "Ah, we won't have that data available for the summer," because we wanted to know if last year we had gone backwards or forwards, because we had been told it had been a dry year and hydro had not produced as much. So a logical assumption might be that we might even have gone backwards. So we said, "What do last year's figures show, as opposed to the year before?" and we were told "We won't have that data until this summer." Now you have just told us that these figures are monitored on a monthly basis?

(Mr Meacher) I did say on a monthly basis, and maybe I should withdraw that. What I meant was that we keep a very careful eye on this, I am not sure whether it is month by month, it is certainly on a year-by-year basis. But I agree that the figures, like many figures, are often not made available, because they have to be very carefully checked, until some significant time after the end of the period to which they refer. But I will check with you how often those figures are actually calculated.

94. Just one other quick point, Chairman. The more we get into debates about figures and statistics and numbers, and the basis of calculations and base years, and all the rest of it, the stronger the argument becomes for these headline indicators to be independently audited. Because we keep coming back to arguing over what are the bases for different figures and indicators, and yet you audit whether you have succeeded or not. The longer this session goes on, I think, the stronger the case becomes; we have

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had several examples in the last two hours why actually someone else needs to audit these rather than yourselves, frankly?

(*Mr Meacher*) I do not agree with that conclusion, and I would say that the EAC is, indeed, carrying out, as indeed its title is meant to do, an environmental audit; that is exactly what is now being carried through. So it is not as though the Government proclaims figures on an unjustified basis. I do not accept that there has been any evidence produced by the Committee that any of these figures are unfair; they are, I agree, not even, they are not standardised, there is a question of whether we could have determined the indicators on a different basis, I agree, that is what the Committee is there to examine and state to Government, and I assure you that, in the light of this session, we will look at all of these issues again. But I do not accept, at all, that we have done this unfairly, unreasonably, or in a sense which is genuinely misleading. But I do agree with you that when you get into the field of statistics and figures and baselines there are always questions about how the matter is done. Now you are suggesting that that should be independently audited in the production of the statistics, in other words, we should put that into the hands of some independent body, as opposed to us doing the best we can and then being openly interrogated in a committee like this. I do take that point. But I do say to you that the Government Information and Statistical Service, in my experience, is a fiercely independent body, and, perhaps in the light of what has happened in times in the past, and I am not talking about recently, when Ministers have been willing to make allegations about trends, the Statistical Service now insists on doing it without reference to Ministers, it produces its own figures, as soon as they are available, and it does so, in my view, with the utmost integrity. I think that is good for everyone, it is good for Government and it is good for all of those who will hold it to account. The idea that the statistics are somehow perhaps carefully examined and perhaps massaged by Ministers before they are produced, let me absolutely disabuse you of that, that is totally untrue.

95. Minister, just the point was, even in terms of who audits whom, the colours that are being applied here; you have not given us the data and then asked the EAC, I think, to colour them, unless I am mistaken, Chairman. Who has applied the colours?

(*Mr Meacher*) The Government Statistical Service; it was not Ministers.

96. But, again, it was Government that applied the colours and not an independent body. Do you see the point I am making?

(*Mr Meacher*) Of course I see the point you are making. But if it was a body within Government which was leant on, could be influenced by Ministers, you would have a stronger point. What I am trying to say is that I can assure you that, if I tried to change the statistics in a way which was favourable to the Government's reputation, I would get, first of all, a straight refusal, and I would also, I think, probably receive a considerable disapprobation even for trying. And I think it is right, this is an independent branch of Government; the fact that it does belong to

Government, I accept it does, but it is not an area where Ministers interfere, and if they tried to interfere they would not succeed.

Mr Gerrard

97. Is not the issue not so much the statistics; in many ways, the discussions that we have been going through this afternoon have not been querying your statistics on climate change right or wrong, we may have queried whether certain statistics should or should not have been collected, but the interpretation placed on those statistics, and whether, really, interpreting what are often quite complicated sets of statistics by little ticks in a green box, or a cross in a red box, is actually a very informative way of doing it, and who makes that decision as to whether it is a little tick or a little cross?

(*Mr Meacher*) I agree with that. It is a trade-off, it is a trade-off between simplicity and understanding for the general member of the public, who is not going to wade through a great deal of intellectually-rigorous analysis of the meaning of statistics, and accuracy. Now it is important that they are accurate, in the sense that, in making it simpler, we have not lost an essential component of the truth, that is very, very important; if we did that, we would be at fault. But there is a case for a relatively simple table, so long as the data which informs it is also, at the same time, supplied. And, of course, these are headline indicators; what we have not talked about is the fact that the Government, and this happened before 1997 and we have continued it, there is set of statistics, 150 statistics, which are collected across the whole panjandrum of what is going on in the society, the economy and the environment, we continue to provide that. But in order for people to understand the essence of what is going on, you do have to simplify it to a manageable core. This is always a problem about news production; someone has to make a judgement about what are the essential issues that are happening now that people ought to know about. Now those are open to challenge, I agree, and that is what you are doing today. But I would defend the basis on which this is done, so long as we have not sacrificed in any serious way the absolute requirement of accuracy.

98. I understand the point you are making, but when Mr Owen Jones started to raise these issues about climate change, there is a point there that the long-term trends, which you pointed to, if we look back over ten years, clearly could be said to be favourable, but there is maybe a short-term turn in that trend, when we look at the last two years' CO₂ emissions. Now how do we show that? One does not want to distort what is actually the long-term picture, but nor should we be ignoring what may be a turn in the wrong direction, surely?

(*Mr Meacher*) I suppose the answer to that is by using as much honesty and integrity as we can, in interpreting the figures. As I say, if we have not done that right, I expect you to say so. I believe that we have. It is, of course, true that the facts themselves, the evidence does not all point in the same direction, even within a short period of time there may be contrary movements, and you have to make one single judgement, you have to try to make that as

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fairly as you can. But the important thing is, you do not conceal the variation on which that judgement is based, so that people can get behind it and can make their own judgements as well.

Joan Walley

99. Just on that point. Would you share with me some concern about the way in which the Government's latest report was received; is there not a danger, in all that you have just been saying, that some of these headline indicators could be trivialised in the press, and what we are really trying to do is get across some kind of basic measurement, which presumably is then going to be a cornerstone for policy? How do you feel about the press coverage that there was of your latest report; could you tell the Committee, please?

(Mr Meacher) Not very pleased. I entirely agree that it is very tempting for the press, unfortunately, to use this kind of material, which, very helpfully, it has come out, some of it, as Mr Owen Jones says, is going to be challenging, difficult and which almost certainly the Government will not achieve. So it is regrettable, it seems to me, that there is an overconcentration in the press on where the Government is not succeeding. It is quite right that that should be drawn attention to, absolutely right, what matters to all of us is to try to do better on things which are not going as well as they should; but the concentration on that and the desire simply to score points at the Government's expense does trivialise it. We are talking here about how our society is going, it really is quite a profound thing that we are trying to do, and it would be much better if the headline indicated "This is where Britain, UK plc, is going, we could do better in this way, but we are succeeding to a large degree, but there needs to be a general change of direction, and these are the policies," rather than some of the headlines that we saw the last time round.

100. I know Mr Challen wants to come in on the actual education side of things, but just to pursue the issue about, what are these indicators for, is there departmental ownership of these indicators, and what do you do with them when you have got them? For example, we have had the statement today, have we not, about there is likely to be some relaxation of green belt; how does that square with the indicator we have got only 57 per cent rather than 60 per cent of the target indicators, in terms of new buildings on brownfield sites?

(Mr Meacher) The answer to your question about responsibility for the indicators is that they are owned by the Government as a whole.

101. Which bit of Government as a whole?

(Mr Meacher) No, I am saying the set of indicators are the responsibility of the Government as a whole, they are the judgement, the overall judgement, as to whether or not we are moving in the direction of a more sustainable country; but the data behind the indicators, of course, is the responsibility of the individual department and agency.

Chairman

102. Does every different indicator have a separate responsible department?

(Mr Meacher) Yes.

103. There is literally one for one, as it were, one department, or two or three?

(Mr Meacher) There is certainly at least one department which is responsible for each indicator, there may be, I am rapidly trying to think of the 15, a joint contribution, but a department, or an agency, is responsible for—

104. There is somebody who takes the lead responsibility for each indicator?

(Mr Meacher) Yes.

105. We would like to have a list of that, by the way, it would be very useful to have a list of that, if we could, which department is responsible for which indicator?

(Mr Meacher) Yes. I think I have actually got it with me; yes, "Responsibility for indicators." Maybe I could pass this over to you at the end.

Joan Walley

106. It is on the back. Take, for example, the indicators about air quality and about the concern about air quality getting worse, linked to traffic. Given the concerns then, which department would have ownership, if we are talking at one and the same time about Treasury Instruments, which might assist with reducing car journeys, or with other departments; who has actually got the ownership of doing something about the trends in the indicators that there are?

(Mr Meacher) I am just looking at air quality. The lead department there is DEFRA, together with NETCEN, which is the Technology Centre . . .

(Mr Hall) The National Environmental Technology Centre.

(Mr Meacher) Yes. First of all, air quality is not getting worse, it is actually significantly getting better, quite significantly getting better. But can I go back to the earlier, very important point; these are not just an archive of where we are going, they are a trigger for action, because, if we are not going in the right way, we have always said, we are not going to change the indicator in order to be convenient to Government or to existing policy, we are going to change the policies.

107. Can you explain then how this proposal today, that we are going to relax the green belt policy, possibly, squares with the fact that we have not met the 60 per cent target, only 57 per cent, in terms of building on land use; why are we not trying to maintain that green belt in order that we can then put more onto the brownfield sites, where is the trigger for that?

(Mr Meacher) One of the indicators is the land use indicator, H14, which is about the percentage of new-build which is on previously-developed land, and it has been around 57 per cent over a long period of time, as the graph indicates. Sixty per cent was a target that we have set; obviously it is a matter for DETR, rather than DEFRA, but the policy does remain that 60 per cent.

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[Continued

[Joan Walley Cont]

108. How would you square the circle? Might it be somebody's view, inside, say, DEFRA, that you could not achieve the 60 per cent if you go ahead and relax the green belt; how do you resolve it? Is it the Green Ministers' Committee that is resolving these issues, has that particular issue been referred to the Green Ministers' Committee, in order to be able to see which direction we are going to be going in; do you see what I mean, there is a contradiction somewhere at the heart of it?

(Mr Meacher) I do. The answer to your direct question is no.

109. Should it have been?

(Mr Meacher) It could be. My understanding is that we remain committed to 60 per cent, and these are hard targets to achieve. If there is to be a change of policy, obviously, that will be discussed interdepartmentally, and it certainly could come to Green Ministers; it certainly has not, at the present time.

110. If it were to be discussed by Green Ministers, which department would refer it there?

(Mr Meacher) DETR.

Mr Francois

111. I think the DETR no longer exists, it is now DTLR?

(Mr Meacher) I am sorry, yes, it is very nostalgic. DTLR, yes.

Mr Challen

112. Could we come to the issue of public awareness. I wonder if I could ask, if we had an indicator of public awareness of these issues, of perhaps not these particular indicators, over the last four or five years, would you say that that indicator would be showing a smiley face or a cross one?

(Mr Meacher) Of awareness or of satisfaction with the results, which?

113. Awareness?

(Mr Meacher) I would have said that there is greater awareness, but nowhere near enough to satisfy me. I think there is, of course, a difference between awareness which flashes past one's consciousness and an awareness which says "This is significant and I've got to do something about it," and it is an issue which we are all involved with. I think the latter is much less than the former, of course.

114. Are we doing enough to engage the public in it? I know that a *Survey of Public Attitudes towards the Environment and Quality of Life*, published last year, found 34 per cent of the public had heard of sustainable development; actually, I think that is probably quite good. But, listening to the Today programme, a week or two ago, they are doing their annual survey of the bird population; have we tried to engage the media in doing mass public, almost mass observation type exercises, and, if they can look at birds, why cannot they go out in the street and look at the number of cars, can they do things of that sort, how many journeys they make on public transport,

to get the Government to engage the public in the process of monitoring these indicators and actually becoming more conscious of them?

(Mr Meacher) I am extremely keen on that, of course, extremely keen. My ambition has always been that these 15 indicators could be as resonant in the public's consciousness about the state of the nation as is the level of unemployment, or interest rates, or exports, on the six o'clock news. I would like to see it have that degree of resonance. We are not there at the moment. Now how do you do that; we have tried. "Are you doing your bit?" I do not know how many people may have seen this, as a television advertisement; it is using famous people, drawn from sports and the glamorous film world, or news presentation, people who might be role models to people, in order to make a point, often humorously, about simple ways in which they could change their life, in order to assist in sustainable development and better environmental practice. I think, again, that has had some impact. I think the latest survey I saw showed 90 per cent, which makes me rather suspicious, of people were aware of this, and 70 per cent of people said they had done something unspecified about it. Now that is, if true, very good, but, I must say, I am sceptical.

115. On the issue of road traffic, we know that every year we now have a car-free day, I think it is 22 September, which, unfortunately, in my view, this year, falls on a Sunday, when a lot of people will find it easier not to use their car perhaps; but, given that that is only four months away, the date was decided a long time ago, is enough being done to promote that sort of thing? If everybody stayed at home, it might even show a little blip on this chart?

(Mr Meacher) I have to tell you, Mr Challen, that my experience on Sunday is that even more people seem to go out for leisurely roaming about in their car even than on a weekday, they may do it in a more leisurely and less aggressive manner, but there are thousands of cars on the road, all visiting their grannies for lunch on Sunday, as far as I can see.

Mrs Clark

116. It is carrying on, really, from the points Mr Challen and Mrs Walley were making, in terms of what does the public actually care about, in terms of these indicators. And, looking at this, and I am thinking of the actual letters I get about the environment from any constituent, and yet, obviously, there is crime, etc., etc., vehicle burglary, why is there not availability of public transport, because I get more letters about the lack of buses and the horror of the buses than anything else, and I get more about that than I do about, for example, the amount of road traffic? So can you actually extend these indicators, or put things in them?

(Mr Meacher) You could, of course, and maybe you will be suggesting in a moment that we should have not only road traffic volumes, which we believe, I think rightly, is probably the best single indicator, but you could supplement that by other material, availability of trains, affordable trains which are punctual, you could have availability of buses, in rural then in urban areas. The problem is again the trade-off between keeping it relatively simple so that

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[Continued

[Mrs Clark Cont]

it impacts on the minds of people who are not anoraks, they do not spend their whole time looking at the statistics, they are not that involved, but 80 per cent of the public are not into this in a big way; we somehow have to impact on them, in a simple, straightforward but accurate manner. Now I am in favour of going to be as detailed and accurate as is possible to achieve that objective, and I suspect that means not too detailed but still accurate.

Joan Walley

117. I was not quick enough just now, when I was asking you as to who will be responsible for taking the issue of any particular target, in this case, the land use one, to the Green Cabinet Committee, you said it would be DTLR, but, given that you are a Minister in DEFRA, how does that square with making sure that where there is a concern that needs to be ironed out there is some ministerial ownership on your part to be able to try to get this matter resolved, where there might be a conflict or not an altogether clear way forward?

(Mr Meacher) Before this goes to an interdepartmental committee, there would be extensive discussion, interdepartmentally, at official level, and quite possibly bilaterally between Ministers.

118. And have you had bilateral discussions then about this proposal to relax the green belt?

(Mr Meacher) No. I have not.

119. And would you have expected to have?

(Mr Meacher) No.

120. And would you now think it might be important to have that, although it is only 57 per cent and not 60 per cent, it is not that far from target; but surely there is an issue here that needs to be addressed, if that proposal were to go ahead?

(Mr Meacher) If there were an intention to change the target, in order to meet the long-term trend, I think that would be a significant issue; but this issue has not been raised with me.

Chairman

121. Minister, you said you thought that this country compared very well with other countries on issues, for example, climate change, and I understand that the European Union is developing sustainability indicators of this kind; will they be similar to these indicators, or will they build on these indicators, or will they complement them?

(Mr Meacher) I think they will. The European Commission produced a synthesis report to the spring Ministerial Council, which integrated seven environmental indicators into the suite of social and economic indicators, which were already there, and they covered greenhouse gas emissions, energy consumption, share of renewables, volumes of transport and modal split of transport, air quality and municipal waste.

122. Ah, municipal waste?

(Mr Meacher) Yes; municipal waste.

123. Good.

(Mr Meacher) *Touché*. All of which are indeed covered by the UK headline indicators, although no doubt you will say that municipal waste is only partially covered by—

124. So it does not cover land use?

(Mr Meacher) No.

125. And it does not cover wildlife?

(Mr Meacher) No.

126. It does not cover river water quality?

(Mr Meacher) No.

127. So there are some considerable discrepancies?

(Mr Meacher) Ours goes wider, yes; but those that they have chosen are more or less the same as we have in our set of headline indicators, and maybe they will decide to extend them further, we would encourage them to do so, of course.

128. Do they publish them annually?

(Mr Hall) Yes, it is going to be the annual synthesis report from now on. This is the first one, this spring.

129. When will that be published?

(Mr Hall) It has been published, in the spring. There is going to be a wider pool of indicators from which they are going to choose a small set to put into the synthesis report each year, and there are indicators in that wider pool covering biodiversity and water quality and water resources. But the synthesis report is going to focus on particular topics and it will select the indicators to put into the report for that particular year.

130. So for the first time we will have quality of life indicators over a range of countries, on a reasonably rational basis, though not entirely the same?

(Mr Meacher) Yes.

131. We have, of course, and you are probably aware of this, the World Economic Forum already publishes an Environmental Sustainability Index, which presumably does the same thing, it covers a range of countries?

(Mr Meacher) It is not the same thing.

132. It covers a range of countries though?

(Mr Meacher) It covers a range of countries, and a large range of countries.

133. And it is attempting to measure quality of life, just as the Government is attempting to measure quality of life and so is the European Union. And I understand that we fell from 16th to 91st in this Sustainability Index, which Mrs Beckett poo-pooed, on the grounds that the weighting was different and therefore wrong. Have you any comments on that?

(Mr Meacher) You will not be surprised to hear me say, Mr Chairman, that I actually believe this; this is a very good example of lies, damn lies and statistics. If you have a different choice of components and you apply different weightings one year to another, you get completely different results.

134. Are you saying they apply different weightings between one year and another?

(Mr Meacher) As far as I know, that is true.

135.

That cannot be true, surely?

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[Continued

[Chairman Cont]

(*Mr Hall*) They themselves say that the Index that was published for 2002 is not comparable with the Index they published in the previous year.

136. That is very strange.

(*Mr Meacher*) If you change the components, there are a very large number of components, and if you change those components and you change the weightings that are given then you cannot get a valid basis for comparison, whatever.

137. As a matter of fact, we understand, our information is, I do not know what your information is, that they actually increase the weighting for greenhouse gases, on which we would expect to do well, and yet we fell from 16th to 91st?

(*Mr Meacher*) That is just one component. It did contain 67 indicators, 22 environmental sustainability sub-indices, so it had a very large number of components and factors; and we have had the discussion this afternoon about how you underpin, in a precise, accurate and rational way, any one particular component. The more you multiply that, the more uncertain the results, and if you get a single aggregate measure which purports to bring all of them together into one single measurement, whether we are at 16, which is good, or 91, which is bad, I think the whole exercise is profoundly flawed, not just because we slipped, if we had gone in the other direction I would have said exactly the same; this is not a good exercise.

138. Though, curiously enough, the countries which normally do well on these indices, such as Finland and Norway and Sweden, did well in this particular set, in both years?

(*Mr Adams*) Some of them did, but some countries you might expect to have done well did quite badly. I think, Japan, for example, is 78th on that list.

139. Right; but Japan you would not expect to do well with those?

(*Mr Adams*) Not with those, but you would expect it to be not two-thirds of the way down.

140. Let me put the question another way. Were you concerned to see this fact emerging, of Britain 91st on their list of economic sustainability indices, were you concerned about that?

(*Mr Meacher*) If I thought that it was accurate, I would be concerned.

141. So you could prove these entirely, there is no relevance?

(*Mr Meacher*) I think it is so profoundly flawed that, I have to say, I do not take it terribly seriously.

142. You do not?

(*Mr Meacher*) No, I do not.

(*Mr Adams*) Can I just quote from the report itself, Chairman, which says: "The Index is not without its weaknesses, however," and then it lists several, "including," which seems to me conclusive, "that it lacks time series data, preventing any serious exercise in validation and limiting its value as a tool for identifying empirically the determinance of good environmental performance."

Mr Jones

143. Some of that criticism could be levelled at some of the things on here as well, and it would be equally valid?

(*Mr Adams*) But what we do not do is change the weighting so that the indicators (can be ?—*inaudible* -).

144. Let me read out what you just said, and we can point to which bits on here that it would also apply to.

(*Mr Adams*) But we do not lack time series data; it is possible to validate and we are (attempting to do that ?).

Mr Jones: Time series data. Where is the time series data, we have been asking you, time series data on climate change gases, and we cannot get any . . .

Mr Francois

145. Where is the time series data on waste, which we are still waiting for?

(*Mr Meacher*) It is here.

146. Then why is there not a figure?

(*Mr Meacher*) We have already been into that. There are two columns, in fact there are three columns, there is 1970, 1990 and 1999 which is the Strategy baseline; now all of the assessments relate to those three dates, we have not changed them, and we are not going to change them. Whereas, if you move about with different baselines, and can I just add to what Mr Adams has just said, which surprises me, many countries, not surprisingly, particularly developing countries, there are missing values; in 90 or 100 cases, the water and air quality indicators are just imputed, someone has plucked a figure out of the air and assumed that is about right for this country. Some indicators are themselves complex indices, ecological footprint; well, how on earth do you work that out, this is just one out of 67, and it itself is extremely uncertain.

Mr Jones

147. Minister, in the introduction to your document you quote the ecological footprint of Wales, and then you say: "What is an Ecological Footprint?" it says, it is on page 23, and it says: "A Footprint can be calculated for an individual, a family, . . ." and then it goes on "The Footprint of Wales has been estimated at 5.25 hectares per person. This is significantly below the UK and European average, and well below . . ." So you cannot rubbish a set of statistics and use it in your own document?

(*Mr Meacher*) I was not rubbishing it, I was simply saying that it is a complex concept. It is perfectly possible to give the criteria by which you can operationalise its quantification, you can do that, we have tried to do that, but the idea that that has been applied to 180-plus countries across the world on the same basis is just simply profoundly untrue.

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[Continued

Mr Barker

148. Minister, you have been extremely generous with your time this afternoon.

(*Mr Meacher*) I have had no option, but it is a great pleasure.

149. Very briefly, I just need to clarify in my own mind your response to Mrs Walley's very important points about land use. On H14, the Government has got, effectively, no marks, it is two amber lights, we are below the 60 per cent target. You have very clearly stated that this is not an archive of performance, this is a call to action. Is relaxing the rules on green belt building a 'call to action' response to H14?

(*Mr Meacher*) It certainly is not. The green belt paper, which is published today, is not published by the Government, it was published by the Royal Town Planning Institute. So I think it is quite wrong to assume that any recommendations or proposals which it contains are Government policy; obviously, we take it seriously, coming from that source, but it is not Government policy.

150. Can I take it, therefore, as champion of the green cause within the Government, that, in the light of these indicators, you would fight any attempt to relax the green belt?

(*Mr Meacher*) I believe that we made a commitment significantly to increase the amount of brownfield development and to reduce development within the countryside; we have made that, as a Government. I am not aware of any commitment on the part of the Government to go back on that. It is a difficult task, it is one which is very testing, it is one on which we may fail. I believe, personally, it is more important to keep to a good target and fail, whilst trying as hard as you can, than to relax the target and then easily meet it.

151. Finally, to capture a well-known phrase, is the green belt safe in your hands?

(*Mr Meacher*) Of course.

Joan Walley

152. I just want to move on to something slightly different, if I may. As I understand it, the headline indicators on sustainable development are there to underpin, reinforce, shape, provide the challenges, and so on and so forth. In view of the various amounts of different indicators which relate to matters which are very much matters for local councils, some of which come within Agenda 21, but many of them relate to improving the local environment, do you share the concern that I have that the forthcoming review of the Standard Spending Assessments is going to be absolutely critical, if all local authorities are going to be able to address particular problems of deprivation that they have, whereas many of the responses that the Government has had so far have been to set up perhaps five pilot projects here, or six Beacon councils there? Would you share my concern that, if local government is able to respond through the public services it provides, the SSA should be taking full account of these headline indicators in terms of sustainable development, and, if so, how should that be?

(*Mr Meacher*) In drawing up the SSAs, and indeed the Public Service Agreements, that are the basis on which the Government provides money to local authorities, we do, of course, take account of the headline indicators, these are the basic core data which are, as I say, shared by Government as a whole, and which in its policies, and those include its relationship with local authorities and the targets which we set them, they are contained within this overarching set of indicators. Then the answer is yes.

153. Good; because my concern is that some local authorities, because of the funding arrangements that they have, are just not able to deliver the kinds of services in a way that would be going hand in hand with sustainable development?

(*Mr Meacher*) That, of course, is a matter of judgement. The Government's belief is, whilst getting away from targeted, ring-fenced money and giving more freedom for manoeuvre for local authorities, nevertheless, they are given targets, contained in the PSAs, a whole, large set of targets, and other targets like the statutory recycling targets which I have set, they are expected to meet them. And we would insist that the overall sum of money going to local authorities is adequate for that purpose; obviously, local authorities always say to us that they want more money, but we would need a very convincing case to indicate that the targets set cannot be met on the basis of funding made available.

154. And are you confident that you have a mechanism in place that can properly, if you like, judge the extent to which local authorities are meeting that?

(*Mr Meacher*) The PSAs are going to be rigorously monitored; not only the SSAs but local PSAs are providing some extra funding on the basis of going beyond the targets set, they will be annually monitored and they have to be met, there is no question about that. I absolutely give you an assurance that this money is only provided on the basis of our rigorous investigation as to the capacity of the local authority to deliver, and then whether or not it does so.

Mr Francois

155. As someone with a considerable amount of green belt in my constituency, I would like to thank you for the words that you have said about the protection of green belt, as I am sure a number of us around this table would welcome that. Can I just endorse what Mrs Walley was saying about the review of SSAs; clearly, some councils will win and some councils will lose. Could one just put a point to you in your discussions, as it were, behind closed doors, within Government. Some councils are already finding it very difficult, because of the money they get, or do not get, to meet some of the environmental objectives that Government gives it; in all seriousness, some of them are really genuinely struggling to do what Government is asking them to do on the money that they get. Could we please ask you, at any discussions that you have, to bear in mind that if the SSA review goes badly against some councils it will make it even more difficult for some of those people to continue to deliver the environmental performance the Government wants?

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[Continued

[Mr Francois Cont]

(*Mr Meacher*) Obviously, one will look at the case that is made. But I must say that I am not aware of what you are referring to, because the main environmental requirement is unquestionably waste. In the current financial year, which is the third and final year of SR2000, the increase in the provision for what is curiously entitled EPCS, Environmental Protection and Cultural Services, an odd oxymoron linkage, it seems to me, but that figure is £1.1 billion over the baseline in 1999–2000; that is a very substantial extra sum. In addition, we have just announced a £140 million ring-fenced challenge fund for local authorities to apply for, to meet their statutory recycling targets; there is an extra, I think it is, £49 million in the New Opportunities Fund for community recycling.

Joan Walley

156. What about the ones that do not succeed?

(*Mr Meacher*) And there is £220 million PFI money for waste infrastructure. Those are substantial sums. If they are not enough, we will, of course, examine it, but I do not believe that they are insufficient.

Mr Francois

157. But, Minister, most of those funds will go to a few large councils that have great experience of bidding; that is what the pattern has been since this—

(*Mr Meacher*) Well, I have been very careful to avoid that, by insisting that the criteria for the distribution of the £140 million ring-fenced fund is not just an open challenge; there are criteria for distribution, which we have published, and a large proportion of that will go to the low-performing councils. Because I know that if we are going to double recycling within three years, treble it within five years, I have got to improve the performance not just of the best, they will probably do it anyway, but of the poor performers, and they will say to me, “Well you haven’t provided us with the money.” So I am earmarking extra funds specifically for them, but they will be held to achieve their targets.

Chairman

158. Minister, I think that was a fascinating session, and I think we are grateful for your part in it.

(*Mr Meacher*) Thank you very much indeed, and I agree. And if I could leave this with you; and I will write, as I have said.

Chairman: Thank you.

Supplementary memorandum from the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs

FOLLOW-UP QUESTIONS TO THE DEPARTMENT BY THE COMMITTEE FOLLOWING THE EVIDENCE SESSION

1. *With reference to question 62 and 64, you agreed to provide the following: (a) an explanation of why UK figures cannot be provided for all 15 headline indicators, (b) how far it is possible to get a standardised UK view and (c) if all the indicators were based on UK figures, would the final assessments for 2001 (red, amber or green) still stand?*

(a) UK figures cannot be provided for all 15 headline indicators because in some cases data or long-term trends are not available or are not comparable between all constituent countries. When the headline indicators were formulated, the constituent countries were consulted regarding data availability and comparability.

(b) Currently, nine indicators use UK data, three use GB data and three use data from England or England and Wales (see Figure 1 for details of the individual indicators). It is not therefore possible at present to get a standardised view across the UK.

The devolved administrations are developing their own sets of indicators. Scotland and Wales have recently published their first set of indicators, influenced by the overall UK set (see Table 1 for comparisons of the indicators sets developed by each country). These were published after the Government annual report in March 2002. Northern Ireland’s set is still in consultation. DEFRA works closely with the other administrations.

(c) If it were possible to expand the six indicators to the UK, that are currently only available for England, England and Wales or Great Britain, the assessments for 2001 (red, green or amber) would be unlikely to change. In all cases the trend will predominantly be affected by that seen in the constituent countries already covered by the indicator, and will not be affected by the relatively small contribution in terms of population size or number of dwellings made by any missing countries.

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[Continued

THE THREE NON-UK/GB INDICATORS ARE:

H7—Housing (England data only)

Scotland: no comparable data are available.

Northern Ireland: not available at present—will be available from the 2001 Housing Conditions survey.

Wales: per cent of unfit dwellings data are available but only for 1998.

H8—Crime (England and Wales data)

Scotland: no comparable data are available due to differing crime definitions under Scottish Law (only total number of crimes are available).

Northern Ireland: data are available on all three crime indicators 1998 to 2000–01—these were not available when the indicators were first published. In addition, England, Wales and Northern Ireland collectively are not a recognised administration.

H14—Land Use (England data only)

Scotland: no comparable data are available.

Northern Ireland: no comparable data are available.

Wales: no comparable data are available.

THE THREE INDICATORS USING GB DATA ARE:

H4—Poverty and Social Exclusion:

Northern Ireland: three of the four indicators are available.

The four indicators contained within this indicator were selected from those within the *Opportunity for all: making progress*¹ and were based on the best available data.

H6—Health:

Northern Ireland: Life expectancy available; Healthy life expectancy not available.

H11—Road Traffic:

Northern Ireland: vehicle kilometres available 1990 to 1998—no long-term trend.

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See Annex A for a table of comparisons by country

2. With reference to question 93, you agreed to clarify how often figures for renewable energy are calculated.

- DTI publish renewable energy data on an annual basis.
- Some components of the renewable energy total are collected more than once per annum.
- Large-scale hydroelectric producers data are collected monthly and “Auto producers” data (companies that generate electricity for the national grid as a by-product of their operations) are collected quarterly.
- Overall electricity sales data (from which the renewable figure is calculated) are collected monthly.

3. Do the latest set of headline indicators paint the picture of a country progressing well on its sustainable development agenda?

The barometer in the 2001 Report clearly show that, on the basis of data published since the snapshot we took when we issued the Strategy in 1999, quality of life as measured by the headline indicators is improving. However, as I was at pains to point out at the press conference on 13 March, whilst there have been improvements in some areas I would not claim that everything is now on the right track.

Since 1999, all or part of six headline indicators remain on the right track including economic output, educational qualifications, greenhouse gas emissions, air quality, river water quality and vehicle theft/domestic burglary (but not violent crime, including robbery, the other component of the crime indicator).

¹ DWP (September 2001) *Opportunity for all: making progress* Third annual report. Cm 5260 ISBN: 0-10-152602-

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[Continued

The trend for another four—investment, employment, poverty and social exclusion and populations of woodland birds (one of the two components of the wildlife indicator)—have improved and these have been given a green light in the *change since Strategy* assessment.

A key test of whether progress is being made towards sustainable development is whether improvements are to be found across the three pillars of social, economic and environmental indicators. As with the first annual report, the latest report shows this to be the case. The 1999 Strategy—*a better quality of life*—makes clear that Government's aim is for all the headline indicators to move in the right direction over time, or, where a satisfactory level has been reached, to prevent a reversal. Where a trend is unacceptable, the Government will adjust policies accordingly, and will look to others to join it in taking action.

There is no sense in which the Government or I can be complacent about the situation. Indeed in no case do we believe it is yet right to change the long-term assessments of *change since 1990* that were made in the year of the Strategy, despite the recent improvements. We are a long way from saying that everything we do – as a nation, as a government, as businesses, as communities and as individuals – is now sustainable; nevertheless I do believe the evidence shows we are a little closer than we were.

4. *You told the Committee (Q95) that it is the Government's statistical service which provides the red, amber, green assessments for the headline indicators. What guiding criteria do they use, if any? Is this applied every year to ensure a consistent assessment?*

The data in the headline indicators are predominantly from long-running time series collected by the Government Statistical Service (GSS), as part of National Statistics, or by environmental regulatory monitoring bodies. National Statistics provides a framework for statistics of quality, integrity and freedom from political interference. It provides an up-to-date, comprehensive and meaningful description of the UK's economy and society. National Statistics covers government data produced to the high professional standards set out in the Official Statistics Code of Practice.

Data sets used for the indicators were selected using quality criteria to ensure that they were sufficiently reliable to monitor progress in the main themes of sustainable development identified in the strategy.

The data are analysed by government statisticians within DEFRA in consultation with the Departments responsible for the data and the relevant policy areas. The traffic light assessments for the *change since Strategy* column were made as a result of such analysis and published following Ministerial approval.

The traffic light system was first introduced in *Quality of Life Counts* in 1999 as a method of summarising progress. It made comparisons with baselines (eg 1970, 1990) to assess which trends have been moving in the right or wrong direction, or where there has been no significant change.

Progress is judged in both the first and the latest annual report on two bases: *Change since 1990* and *Change since the Strategy* (comparing the most recent data with data available at the time of the Strategy—usually one or two years prior to the Strategy).

5. *You have been encouraging local authorities to use sustainable development indicators on a voluntary basis. How many are doing so?*

Following the production of the national set of *Quality of life counts*, it was recognised that more local indicators were needed to better reflect local issues and to assist in the monitoring of regional and local strategies. In July 2000 a new handbook *Local quality of life counts* was published, offering ideas for measuring sustainable development and quality of life in local communities. In total, 5,000 *Local quality of life counts* handbooks were published. By October 2001, the distribution centre had issued 4,481.

The Audit Commission have been running a pilot study of Local Authority quality of life indicators over the past 18 months. To date, 93 local authorities are involved (approximately a quarter of all authorities).

6. *The sustainable development strategy and indicators were published in 1999, the first annual report was published in January 2001, and the second in March 2002—Is DEFRA planning to settle into a more regular reporting routine now?*

The first annual report covers the period from the Strategy to the end of 2000. The second report covers the 12-month, calendar year 2001. The next report, which will be published in the early months of 2003, will cover the year 2002.

As a country, we are making progress on Sustainable Development. We were one of the first countries—in 1994—to produce a Strategy after the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio. When this Government came to power we set in train the development of a new Strategy, published in 1999—which placed equal emphasis on the social dimension as on the economic and environmental dimensions of sustainable development. We are world leaders in terms of annual reporting and the use of indicators to assess progress towards sustainable development.

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[Continued

7. *Many of the 150 core indicators are yet to be developed or require further development before we can expect systematic reporting. Could you please provide an update on the progress being made to get all the indicators operational. When can we expect the full data set to be up and running?*

Establishing the *Quality of life counts* was a very ambitious exercise, and the UK was the first country to produce such a comprehensive set of indicators of sustainable development.

The headline indicators are now well established. When producing the wider core set of almost 150 indicators in *Quality of life counts*, we felt that it was important to highlight the need for indicators for areas where none are available, and to recognize that some of those we could establish are not ideal. The development of indicators is very much dependent on the availability of data, and techniques to transform the data into meaningful indicators that will genuinely reflect progress.

Various streams of work have been taken forward to fill the gaps or to improve existing indicators, for example on resource use, access to the countryside or other green space, and tourism. But work is ongoing.

There is a commitment to undertake a full review of all the indicators by 2004. It should be recognized however, that indicator development is a continually evolving process, as new issues arise or, new data become available.

See Annex A for a table of comparisons by country

8. *Can you clarify why the full set of statistics, supporting the waste headline indicator (H15), are only collected every five years?*

The statistics for the headline indicator H15 on arisings and management of waste from households, industry and commerce, including construction and demolition, come from a variety of surveys by DEFRA, DTLR, the devolved administrations and environment agencies. The frequency of collection reflects the likely degree of change from year to year and a balance between meeting policy, planning and other reporting needs against the costs and burden to respondents of collecting the data. For example, *Waste Strategy 2000* (published May 2000), is due to be reviewed every five years. Future data collection will also need to take account of the draft EU regulation on Waste Statistics although the frequency of reporting has yet to be agreed, original proposals would require data every three years, currently it is every two years.

Information on household waste is available from an annual survey of local authorities but this makes up only about a sixth of the 170–210 million tonnes of waste covered by the indicator. DTLR are currently undertaking the second in what is planned to be a regular series of surveys of construction and demolition waste. Data should be available later this year which would allow a partial update of the indicator since construction and demolition waste together with household waste make up 55–60 per cent of the indicator. Estimates of industrial and commercial waste in the indicator are based on an Environment Agency survey undertaken in 1998–99. The Agency with DEFRA are considering plans for the second survey which is likely to be in 2002–03. The results of this survey will allow a full update of the indicator.

9. *Can you confirm your statement (Q89) that there is no interim target for renewable energy for 2003? Our understanding is that there is a target of 5 per cent for 2003.*

The transcript highlights a certain amount of confusion surrounding the issue of interim energy targets, which remained unresolved as we progressed onto other areas of our debate. In paragraph 83 of the document I confirmed the “Renewables Obligation of 10 per cent of all energy, for electricity generation from renewable sources by 2010.” Mr Jones then went on to enquire about the interim renewable targets, of which I stated there was no such confirmed targets—still referring to the Renewables Obligation.

It has now become clear from reviewing this debate that the interim target to which Mr Jones alluded, was that proposed in conjunction with the preceding Non-Fossil Fuels Obligation (NFFO) in the DTI’s March 1999 consultation document on renewable energy. The delayed 2003 target of 5 per cent to which Mr Wilson referred in his testimonial earlier this year was contingent on approved projects under NFFO gaining planning permission, which has proved a more gradual process than originally expected. It was never set up as a measure of the Renewables Obligation to which I was referring at this point. The Renewables Obligation, which only came into effect in April this year, has no directly comparable interim target. However, under the Obligation, licensed electricity suppliers are required to provide increasing percentages of total supplies from renewable sources. The percentage is set to rise from 3 per cent for 2002–03 by annual stages to 10.4 per cent in 2000–11. The set level for 2004–05 is 4.9 per cent and for 2005–06, 5.5 per cent.

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[Continued

Annex A

Table 1

COMPARISONS OF THE INDICATOR SETS DEVELOPED BY EACH COUNTRY

Headline Indicators with equivalents in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland

SUMMARY:

Indicator	Source of figures used in Headline Indicator	Are there similar published SD Indicators?		Where UK figures aren't used: do these published indicators give an equivalent figure?	Are data available from the respective administrations?	
		Scotland	Wales			
H1	Economic Growth	UK	N	N	—	—
H2	Investment	UK	N	N	—	—
H3	Employment	UK	Y	Y	—	—
H4	Poverty & Social Exclusion	GB	Y	N	No—Scottish data are not comparable	N Ireland: data available for all except elderly fuel poverty.
H5	Education	UK	Y	Y	—	—
H6	Health	GB	N	Y	Yes—Wales: Life expectancy	N Ireland: data available for life expectancy not healthy life.
H7	Housing	England	N	Y	Yes—Wales: % of unfit dwellings	N Ireland: not available at present Scotland: not available Wales: data from 1998 only.
H8	Crime	England & Wales	Y	Y	Wales: yes—all indicators Scotland: only total crime figures	N Ireland: data available since 1998 Scotland: not available.
H9	Climate Change	UK	Y	Y	—	—
H10	Air Quality	UK	Y	Y	—	—
H11	Road Traffic	GB	Y	N	Scotland: roughly equivalent (vehicle km).	N Ireland: roughly equivalent (vehicle km).
H12	River Water Quality	UK	N	N	—	—
H13	Wildlife	UK	N	Y	—	—
H14	Land Use	England	N	N	N	N Ireland: not available Scotland: not available Wales: not available.
H15	Waste	UK	Y	Y	—	—

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