



House of Commons
Environmental Audit Committee

Plastic bottles: Turning Back the Plastic Tide: Government Response to the Committee's First Report

Fourth Special Report of Session 2017–19

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Environmental Audit Committee

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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Committee reports are published on the Committee's website at www.parliament.uk/eacom and in print by Order of the House.

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Committee staff

The current staff of the Committee are David Slater (Clerk), Nina Foster (Second Clerk), Nicholas Davies (Committee Specialist), Ian Cruse (Committee Specialist), Dr Fedra Vanhuysse (Committee Specialist), Ameet Chudasama (Senior Committee Assistant), Baris Tufekci (Committee Assistant) and Sean Kinsey (Media Officer).

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Fourth Special Report

The Environmental Audit Committee published its First Report of Session 2017–19, on *Plastic bottles: Turning Back the Plastic Tide*, HC 339 on 22 December 2017. The Government's response was received on 14 February 2018 and is appended to this report.

Appendix: Government Response

The Government thanks the Committee for its report on plastic bottles.

We have made progress in boosting recycling rates for plastic bottles; collection for recycling has increased dramatically, from less than 13,000 tonnes in 2000 to over 343,000 tonnes in 2016.

However, urgent action to reduce plastic waste in the marine and open environment is vital for the future of our planet, as well as being a considerable economic opportunity.

This Government wants to leave our environment in a better state than we found it. Our *25 Year Environment Plan*,¹ published on 11 January 2018, outlines steps to achieve that ambition. The Plan sets out targets to work towards eliminating all avoidable waste by 2050 and all avoidable plastic waste by the end of 2042. We will publish a new Resources and Waste Strategy this year which will set out our approach to reducing waste, promoting markets for secondary materials, incentivising producers to design better products and how we can better manage materials at the end of life by targeting environmental impacts.

The Committee looked at a number of issues, which the Government has addressed below.

Preventing Plastic Bottle Waste

Recommendation 1

The UK uses 38.5 million plastic bottles every day, of which 15 million are not recycled. 700,000 plastic bottles are littered every day, encouraging more littering and causing damage to natural habitats and human well-being. Plastic bottle waste is not simply a recycling or environmental issue; it is a social issue with considerable direct and indirect costs for taxpayers through litter picking and healthcare. (Paragraph 17)

We note the Committee's point on this issue. We are already taking action through our *Litter Strategy for England*,² which was published in April 2017. *The Litter Strategy* sets out our aim to clean up the country and deliver a substantial reduction in litter and littering behaviours by means of better education, enforcement and 'binrastructure' (the design, number and location of public litter bins and so on). We will deliver a new national anti-litter campaign, led by the Government and funded by the private sector. Subject to Parliamentary approval, we are introducing new regulations to improve local authorities' enforcement powers, supported by new guidance on its proportionate use.

1 https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/673203/25-year-environment-plan.pdf

2 https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/630999/litter-strategy-for-england-2017-v2.pdf

Separately we note the Committee has used evidence presented to it for the use of bottles, which was based on estimates and simple assumptions by a consultancy, rather than a detailed market assessment.

Recommendation 2

Following the weak analysis of marine litter made in the UK Marine Strategy Part Three, we recommend that the Government set out a timescale for publishing a more accurate assessment of the current levels, properties and impacts of marine litter and the steps it will take to protect our oceans from plastic pollution. The rising tide of plastic waste in the ocean has been described by UN Oceans Chief as a “planetary crisis” and there is increasing public appetite for urgent action in this area. The Government has committed to protecting the marine environment from all kinds of pollution, including plastic pollution, under UN Sustainable Development Goal 14. However, the Government has only recently begun to address this by exploring the potential of a tax on single-use plastics. We have heard that tackling plastic pollution at source is the most effective way to mitigate the damage caused by larger plastic items, such as plastic bottles, as well as microplastics. The Marine Strategy Part One found that “significant amounts of litter appear in our seas and on our beaches”, bringing environmental and economic damage. At the very least the Government should increase clean-up resources to coastal areas, where, by function of tide or topography there is a large plastic pollution problem. We urge the Government to introduce a ‘Coastal Clean-up’ fund to support the removal of plastic from our beaches and seas. (Paragraph 24)

We disagree with the Committee’s conclusions on the marine litter analysis in the UK Marine Strategy Part Three. Plastic’s persistence means that the amount of litter already in the marine environment is significant, so the effectiveness of any measures will be slow to realise. It is also a transboundary problem with litter from many international sources transported to UK waters by ocean currents, wind drift and storms.

In 2018 the Government will report on the next assessment of the state of UK marine waters, including the extent that Good Environmental Status for UK seas has been achieved under the Marine Strategy Framework Directive. The assessment will give us a comprehensive evaluation of UK seas, including whether there have been improvements since 2012. It will tell us the current state of the condition of marine habitats; and other marine biodiversity; and whether pollution, including marine litter is still harmful to sea life. Importantly it will provide evidence of whether or not the policies and programme of measures that we have in place are working and allow us to modify them if necessary.

We agree with the Committee that it is important to tackle the main sources of marine litter as it is almost impossible to remove once it has entered the marine environment. Defra funds the Marine Conservation Society to monitor beach litter and greatly appreciates the contribution from members of the public that participate in beach cleans around our coast. We agree that litter removal is important and we have signed up to the Global

Ghost Gear Initiative³ to remove discarded fishing nets from our seas. We also support the Fishing for Litter⁴ scheme and will look at other mechanisms that would support the removal of plastic from our beaches and seas.

Councils have a legal duty to remove litter and refuse from beaches above the high water mark. The statutory Code of Practice on Litter and Refuse⁵ describes the standards of cleanliness that land managers such as councils are expected to be able to achieve, and requires that amenity beaches should be generally clear of all litter and refuse between 1 May and 30 September inclusive. Land managers are also advised to monitor and clean beaches below the high water mark as appropriate. While beaches present unique challenges because of the terrain, conditions, accessibility and the need to be sensitive to habitats, land managers should do as much as is practicable.

Preventing Plastic Bottle Use

Recommendations 3 and 4

Access to clean drinking water is a basic human right. The Government should prioritise reducing the use of plastic bottles. We believe that small changes can deliver big results. The UK has a ready supply of safe, clean tap water, yet the consumption of bottled water continues to grow. We have heard that providing more free drinking water taps and fountains in public spaces could lead to a 65% reduction in the use of plastic water bottles, but there is no obligation for unlicensed premises to provide free drinking water. We call on the Government to introduce a regulation for all public premises which serve food or drink to provide free drinking water on request, including sports centres and leisure centres. Businesses should volunteer to get involved with community water schemes such as Refill Bristol to advertise their provision of free drinking water. (Paragraph 32)

There are very few water fountains in parks and other public spaces. There are none in Manchester or Merseyside, one in West Yorkshire, and four in the West Midlands. We believe that the provision of free water fountains provides an opportunity for water companies to demonstrate their corporate social responsibility. We were disappointed not to receive evidence from water companies given their filtration and sewage systems remove huge amounts of plastic debris from waterways. Yorkshire Water has installed three fountains in Hull, as part of their celebration of being 2017 City of Culture, we urge other water companies to follow suit. The Government should review the health and litter-reducing benefits of providing public water fountains, amend the Water Industry Act 1991 to give water companies formal powers to erect water fountains. Additionally, the Government should run a wide-reaching communications campaign to actively promote the use of refillable bottles to ensure that new water fountains and refill stations within shops and transportation hubs are used. (Paragraph 33)

3 The Global Ghost Gear Initiative (GGGI) is a cross-sectoral alliance committed to driving solutions to the problem of lost and abandoned fishing gear worldwide. The GGGI aims to improve the health of marine ecosystems, protect marine animals, and safeguard human health and livelihoods. www.ghostgear.org

4 The Fishing for Litter project is designed to reduce the amount of marine litter in our seas by physically removing it and to highlight the importance of good waste management amongst the fleet. Participating vessels are given hardwearing bags to collect marine litter that is caught in their nets during their normal fishing activities. www.fishingforlitter.org.uk/what-is-fishing-for-litter

5 The Code of Practice on Litter and Refuse, published April 2006: www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/221087/pb11577b-cop-litter.pdf

We agree with the Committee's view on the importance of making drinking water more readily available in public places, as a means of reducing single-use plastic bottles. As laid out in the *25 Year Environment Plan*, the Government is already taking action in this area.

It is clear that we need a cultural shift, both in making it clear to the public that they are able to refill bottles free of charge in many places, and in making sure people feel comfortable asking for tap water, even when it is not explicitly clear that it is available. Water companies, through Water UK, have been working to create a network of water refill points across England. Defra is working with Water UK on this roll-out. Water companies in England have committed to publishing their plans for reducing single-use plastic bottles in their regions, in September 2018. Ministers have written to retailers and coffee shops asking them to provide tap water, allowing the public to refill bottles. We are also working across government, for example with the Department for Transport to also encourage transport hubs and retailers to extend the provision of free water, and to publicise this.

The water industry is supporting the Refill campaign, which is managed by City to Sea. The water industry's trade body, Water UK, is funding the upscaling of the campaign to "make refilling your bottle as easy, convenient and cheap as possible by introducing refill points on every street". As the Government referred to in its *25 Year Environment Plan*, the Refill project is aiming to shift from just covering a handful of towns to covering the whole of England.

Regional coordinators, paid for by the water sector, will work in their areas with local initiatives and directly with potential water refill points, to bring as many new water points on board as possible.

At present, drinking water must be provided in licenced premises, and regulations also require employers to provide drinking water for their staff. While there is no obligation on water companies to provide water fountains, they already have the necessary powers to be able to erect water fountains when working with the relevant landowner.

Many businesses have already committed to providing tap water to the public, including Pret a Manger, Starbucks, Costa Coffee, Premier Inn, Moto and Neal's Yard. Each of these businesses have a large number of sites, so between them will make a substantial difference to the availability of tap water to the public. In addition there are many committed businesses that are not chains but which have heavy footfall, such as Heathrow and Birmingham airports, which have the potential to save large numbers of single-use bottles.

Recommendation 5

Paragraph 34: Parliament and Government departments must show leadership and ban the sale of disposable plastic bottles in their buildings—providing water fountains and reusable bottles instead. We would like to see a plastic-free Parliament.

In the Government's *25 Year Environment Plan* we committed to removing all consumer single use plastics from the central government estate offices. We will set out more details on how we achieve this, including timescales, later this year.

Ministers have written to Sir Paul Beresford MP, the Chair of the Administration Committee, to see what the Houses of Parliament can do to ensure that the amount of single use plastic on the parliamentary estate is reduced. We are encouraged that the Committee is already researching this.

Shifting the Financial Burden of Packaging Waste

Recommendations 6, 7 and 8

Currently, taxpayers cover around 90% of the costs of packaging waste disposal, indicating that the producer responsibility scheme is not working as it should. The Government's commitment to explore potential reforms to the UK's current producer responsibility schemes is long overdue. Industry has been calling for reform for years. In order to make packaging producers more responsible for the type of products they are putting on the market, we recommend that the Government adapts a producer responsibility compliance fee structure that stimulates the use of recycled plastic, rewards design for recyclability, and increases costs for packaging that is difficult to recycle or reuse. This would incentivise producers to use more sustainable packaging, whilst reducing the costs on taxpayers. Additionally we recommend that the Government lower the de minimis packaging handling threshold from 50 tonnes to 1 tonne. This would ensure that all businesses who handle a significant amount of packaging are obligated to recycle. (Paragraph 47)

The Environment Agency, which regulates Packaging Recovery Notes, told us they have no regulatory control over how the revenue from Packaging Recovery Notes is spent. Figures show that there is low investment in UK reprocessing facilities compared with waste exportation. This is grossly inefficient. We support industry calls for greater transparency over how recovery note revenue is spent and recommend the Government to require all waste reprocessors to report detailed information on actions funded by recovery notes. Waste reprocessors should be held accountable to the Environment Agency for exactly how they spend packaging recovery revenue, especially if they fund export considerably more than domestic reprocessing. This would provide sustainable investment to boost the UK's domestic recycling capabilities, as well as greater financial assistance to local authorities. Given the recent Chinese ban on mixed plastic waste from the UK, this investment is both urgent, to avoid a huge increase in landfill, and will save money and create jobs in the long run. (Paragraph 48)

We recommend that as part of its reform of PRO the Government phases in a mandated minimum 50% rPET content for the production of new plastic bottles by 2023 at the latest. This would create a UK market for recycled plastic, which struggles against low oil prices which make new plastic cheaper. Introducing this legislation would help create a circular economy by ensuring that plastics are reprocessed. The legislative requirement would be a minimum standard. We expect that the reformed producer responsibility regime set out in the previous section would drive further design innovation. (Paragraph 56)

Tackling waste, especially waste plastic, is a key priority for the Government. *The Clean Growth Strategy*,⁶ published on 12 October 2017, commits us to move towards zero avoidable waste by 2050 and announced that we are exploring changes to the packaging producer

6 https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/651916/BEIS_The_Clean_Growth_online_12.10.17.pdf

responsibility scheme. This will look at all aspects of the regime, including mechanisms to incentivise better design, encourage the use of recycled material and provide greater transparency for producer funding.

In the *25 Year Environment Plan* we committed to work towards eliminating all avoidable plastic waste by the end of 2042. We have committed to publish a new Resources and Waste Strategy later this year, which will build on the four point plan announced by the Environment Secretary for tackling plastic waste. The four point plan targets action at each stage of the product lifecycle:

- At the production stage, we will encourage producers to take more responsibility for the environmental impacts of their products and rationalise the number of different types of plastic in use;
- At the consumption stage, we will reduce the amount of plastic in circulation through reducing demand for single-use plastic;
- At the end of use stage, we will make it easier for people to recycle;
- At the end of life/waste management stage, we will improve the rate of recycling.

At the production stage, this includes encouraging producers to take more responsibility for the life-span of their products and making sure plastic items are more carefully designed. We will look at how we can better incentivise producers to manage resources more efficiently through changes to our producer responsibility schemes. In our new Resources and Waste strategy, we will set out our approach to promoting well-functioning markets for secondary materials and incentivising producers to design better products.

At the consumer stage we want to reduce demand for single-use plastic. We will make it easier for people to recycle and increase the amount of plastic being recycled. We are already working with the Waste and Resources Action Programme (WRAP) to support consistent and comprehensive collections of waste and recycling. In September 2016, as part of an industry led group, WRAP published a voluntary Framework for Greater Consistency. This outlines a vision where a core set of recyclable materials (including plastic bottles) from every household in England are collected and sorted cost effectively for onward reprocessing, using one of three standardised collection systems.

We will also look at how the tax system could further reduce the amount of waste we create through a call for evidence on single-use plastics to be published shortly.

Improving Plastic Bottle Recycling

Recommendation 9

Although nearly every local authority in the UK now provides household collection for recycling, the recycling rate for plastic bottles has plateaued in the last five years and the ONS found that household recycling rates are deteriorating. We have heard that plastic bottle recycling is stalling partly because recycling rates are measured by tonnage, which creates a disincentive for local authorities to focus on collection of lightweight, high-volume materials. We recommend that the Government sets a post-2020 recycling rate of 65%. Encouraging recycling of products which use high levels of energy when produced from virgin materials

should be a priority. The British Plastics Federation told us that it takes 75% less energy to make a plastic bottle from recycled material than virgin materials. The Government should set out a timeline for this review process in the upcoming Waste and Resources Strategy. (Paragraph 65)

All local authorities in mainland England collect plastic bottles except for Rotherham and Copeland. Copeland have indicated that they will commence collecting plastics bottles from 2018/19 and Minister Coffey has written to Rotherham to express her disappointment that they do not offer this service and to encourage them to do so. Minister Coffey has also asked the Environment Agency to review the council's approach. We have made good progress on EU targets to recycle specific packaging types, including plastics and paper, and in 2015 the UK recycled 60% of all packaging waste arisings against the EU target of 55%.

Whilst the weight of plastic bottles does have some influence on the recycling of packaging materials as set out under the current packaging waste regulations, relevant producers have a set weight-based target for recycling of plastic packaging, and plastic bottles form an important component of that. However, once the target for recycling plastic packaging is met, producers have little incentive to recycle beyond this target, except where it is commercially viable to do so. Plastic bottles, especially ones made from polyethylene terephthalate (PET), do have a relatively high value on the secondary materials market and therefore we would expect businesses to recycle more. However, the incentive to use recycled materials is not just related to the price of virgin plastic compared to recycled materials; it is also affected by the quality and availability of supply.

We are considering further measures for our resources and waste strategy, including alternative targets that prioritise environmental benefits of recycling materials rather than just weight measures.

Recommendations 10 and 11

We have heard that Deposit Return Schemes for plastic bottles and cans achieve very high recycling rates. They help to facilitate a circular economy, as well as cutting down on the third most common litter type in the UK. A Deposit Return Scheme presents the opportunity to create a cohesive recycling mechanism for plastic bottles and other beverage containers throughout the UK. This could help boost the current stalling rate from 57% to around 80 – 90%. In particular, Deposit Return Schemes would capture the plastic bottles that are used on-the-go that currently escape household recycling. Deposit Return Schemes introduce a financial incentive for consumers to return their plastic bottles thereby reducing litter. We have also heard that a Scheme may encourage people to think twice about littering other items, due to the 'spill-over' effect. We have heard serious and legitimate concerns about the introduction of a Deposit Return Scheme from local authorities, plastic bottle producers and retailers, however we heard that a well-designed Deposit Return Scheme can overcome these concerns. (Paragraph 93)

We recommend that the Government introduces a legislated Deposit Return Scheme for all PET plastic drinks bottles. The upcoming Waste Strategy should also examine whether to introduce a Deposit Return Scheme for other beverage containers, such as aluminium cans, to foster a culture of recycling packaging used on-the-go. It is vital that a Deposit Return Scheme is well-designed. It should be created after a consultation with stakeholders such as

manufacturers, retailers and local authorities. Consultation should build upon the working group already in place and examine the innovations suggested to improve the functioning of a Deposit Return Scheme, such as local authority collaboration and retailer partnerships. We particularly encourage collaboration with Zero Waste Scotland, who are responsible for planning Scotland's Deposit Return Scheme. Based on research, the scheme should place a 10 – 20p deposit on top of the price of product that will be refunded to the consumer upon return of the bottle or can. We believe a Deposit Return Scheme will create a source of good quality recycled plastic for manufacturers, therefore ensuring that fewer plastic bottles are incinerated, landfilled or littered in land or at sea. (Paragraph 94)

We agree with the Committee that we need to encourage consumers to dispose of products in the most appropriate way. As outlined in our *Litter Strategy for England*, we want to support people being able to recycle more and to encourage people to recycle 'on the go'.

From 2 October to 20 November an independent working group set up under the Litter Strategy held a call for evidence on measures to reduce littering of drinks containers and promote recycling. This included seeking evidence on the costs, benefits and impacts of deposit and reward and return schemes for plastic bottles and other drinks containers.

The Voluntary and Economic Incentives working group is due to report to Ministers shortly with their findings from the call for evidence and advice on a potential way forward. We will need to consider how a Deposit Return Scheme or other behavioural incentives would fit with other planned work, such as wider reform of the packaging waste producer responsibility regime and the call for evidence on the potential for taxes or charges for single-use plastics, in order to avoid producers or consumers being charged multiple times for the same products. These potential incentives would all work towards the same overall outcomes of increasing recycling and reducing litter.