

## Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee

### Call for Evidence – Plastic Waste

#### About A Plastic Planet

A Plastic Planet was founded in 2017 with a simple goal, to ignite and inspire the world to turn off the plastic tap. The organisation's ambition is to inspire action that will dramatically reduce the use of plastic through a collaborative approach that works with businesses, governments and the public to provide plastic-free solutions.

1. **What measures should the UK Government take to reduce the production and disposal of single-use plastics in England? Are the measures announced so far, including a ban on certain single-use plastics and a plastic packaging tax, sufficient?**

Whilst the Government has made some positive moves to combat plastic pollution the measures announced so far still do not go far enough.

For example, the single-use plastics ban was brought in to tackle unnecessary plastic items which can be replaced with alternative and more sustainable materials. So far, the ban includes plastic straws, cotton buds, and drinks stirrers, however there are many more plastic items that should feature on this list.

Plastic sachets are case in point. Some 855 billion are produced each year. Uncollectible and unrecyclable due to being multi-laminates, their end of life is incineration, landfill, or the natural environment. In the case of sachets used by the personal and home care industries - often to package sample sized products to drive sales - some eight-in-ten Britons were found to support a ban, yet the Government has not taken action.<sup>i</sup>

The single-use plastic bag levy has seen sales of single-use plastics bags decrease, but to the detriment of the levy's intentions consumers are now using more "bags for life" as many supermarkets have phased out single-use bags. Bags for life use substantially more plastic than the single-use bags in order to give them their sturdy structure. In 2019 supermarkets sold 1.58 billion bags for life, the equivalent of 57 bags per household or more than one bag per week.<sup>ii</sup> There are a raft of alternative materials that can be used in place of plastic for items such as these.

Morrisons recently announced in April this year that it would remove all plastic bags from its stores, opting for paper bags instead. The move will save almost 100 million plastic bags, and 3,200 tonnes of plastic each year.<sup>iii</sup> The paper bag is nothing new, as witnessed in America where it is a staple of grocery shopping. From May 2021, following successful trials in 2018, Co-op rolled out compostable bags across all its stores, with the introduction seeing around 55 million plastic bags being removed from circulation so far.<sup>iv</sup>

The Plastic Packaging Tax will see a levy placed on items that are comprised of less than 33 percent recycled content. Whilst this was a landmark move when the tax was first announced in the budget in 2018, plastic can only be recycled a handful of times before the polymer chains break down to the point that it becomes unusable. Recycled or not all plastic is eventually destined for landfill, incineration or the environment.

Just 9 percent of all plastic ever produced has been recycled. Instead of focusing on recycling, the Government needs to place the onus on reducing plastic production and consumption. In France, legislation is being introduced which will see supermarkets dedicate at least 20 percent of their floor space to refillable options in a bid to cut down on plastic packaging.<sup>v</sup> These are the sort of initiatives the Government should be looking to adopt and expand on.

UK supermarkets have begun to adopt refill schemes, however they are very much on a trial basis and have not been introduced nationwide. With the schemes receiving positive feedback from consumers, the Government should encourage supermarkets to expand them nationally.

Waitrose announced it is extending its refill stations to incorporate more products after the scheme's success. The store will now offer 51 lines, including frozen fruit, store cupboard essentials such as rice, pasta and grains, cereals, dried fruit, snacking and coffee, as well as washing detergent.<sup>vi</sup>

Other supermarkets to trial refill schemes include:

Marks & Spencer  
Sainsburys  
Asda  
Morrisons

Meanwhile, Co-op is expanding its trial of refill stations from food produce to include body care and home cleaning products, with the expansion set to take place in September 2021.<sup>vii</sup> And in June 2021, Unilever launched a new trial in selected UK supermarkets which allows customers to purchase re-fills of their cleaning and toiletry products.<sup>viii</sup>

The Government is seeking to introduce an Extended Producer Responsibility scheme, where the companies most responsible for producing plastic waste have to pay the cost of preventing it from littering the natural environment.<sup>ix</sup> Having consulted on the issue this year, it's vital that the Government holds companies to account and introduces measures which makes them seek out more sustainable materials for their products.

The Government should use legislation to further incentivise retail to shift towards refillable goods, which have minimal environmental impact. They should further strengthen the single-use plastics ban to cover a wide range of plastics, from sachets to coffee cups, to packaging where a viable and sustainable alternative is available. The plastic tax too should be strengthened to further boost recycled content and disincentivise the use of virgin plastic.

The Government has brought in measures to tackle plastic pollution, but there is still plenty more to do. A Plastic Planet believes there are several measures the Government could implement through the upcoming Environment Bill which would have a drastic impact on plastic pollution.

They are as follows:

- Banning non-food plastic sachets. The personal care industry alone produces some 120 billion plastic sachets each year, commonly used to hold samples of perfume, shampoo, and moisturiser. Uncollectible, unrecyclable, these sachets are destined for landfill, incineration, or the environment. Our call has received strong political support too, being backed by a wealth of cross-party politicians.<sup>x</sup>

- Introducing a total ban on the UK's exports of plastic waste with a view to encouraging investment in waste processing infrastructure in the UK, as well as plastic reduction targets.
- Introducing mandatory plastic footprint reporting for the UK's supermarkets, as well as targets to reduce it. Supermarkets are huge contributors to the plastic crisis, and so far voluntary pacts and pledges the industry has signed up to have failed to solve the crisis. Holding industry to account is vital in stemming the tide of plastic pollution. MPs agree too, with more than 40 supporting the call.<sup>xi</sup>

## **2. How should alternatives to plastic consumption be identified and supported, without resorting to more environmentally damaging options?**

Much of packaging today is avoidable, for example a plastic bottle is often wrapped in another piece of plastic which displays branding, or food goods are often placed in a plastic tray and then wrapped in a plastic film. Removing as much packaging as possible should be the first action. Only when plastic cannot simply be removed should alternatives be sought.

Glass and aluminium are effective replacements for many products, particularly for beverage containers, as both are infinitely recyclable. With the Government looking to introduce a deposit return scheme for drinks containers (set to be implemented in 2023),<sup>xii</sup> these can be collected and processed in a closed loop.

Compostable materials, when used in place of plastic, should be recognised as playing a key role in capturing biowaste which can be converted into high quality composts to regenerate our rapidly depleting soils, and help take food waste out of landfill where it produces the harmful greenhouse gas methane. Products to be considered compostable must be certified compliant with EN 13432 or an equivalent standard accepted by the environment protection regulators.

The Government should ensure it takes a meticulous approach when incentivising industry to reduce plastic use. As stated above, the first step should be to eliminate the use of materials where they are not needed. Where material is needed, viable alternatives should be promoted in place of plastic. Glass, aluminium, and compostable materials will all serve the same purpose as plastic, but won't have the same impact upon the environment.

## **3. Is the UK Government's target of eliminating avoidable plastic waste by 2042 ambitious enough?**

No. While the Government has introduced measures to combat plastic pollution, they do not go far enough and are not stringent enough to put a dent in the crisis.

Currently, commitments from governments around the world will not tackle the plastic crisis. A report from the Pew Charitable Trusts and SystemIQ (*Breaking the Plastic Wave*) found that even if all government and industry commitments were met, it would only reduce the flow of plastic into the world's oceans by 7 percent by 2040.<sup>xiii</sup> It further outlines that unless immediate and sustained action is taken, the amount of plastic waste entering the ocean every year will triple by 2040 to 29 million megatonnes – the equivalent of dumping 110 pounds of plastic on every meter of coastline around the world.

Major industries are placing an onus on plastic as a source of growing profits also. Carbon Tracker & SystemIQ's report – The Future's Not in Plastics: Why plastics demand won't rescue the oil sector – outlines how oil and petrochemical industries are placing their future growth prospects on demand for plastics.<sup>xiv</sup> The report found forecasts from BP and the IEA both see petrochemicals as the largest driver of expected oil demand, making up 95 percent and 45 percent respectively. The Government must push back against these expectations.

While the technologies exist to inspire a shift away from plastic, the infrastructure, policies, business processes, and financing are not in place to enable their rapid deployment. A substantial shift of investment away from the production of new plastic to the development of reuse and refill systems and sustainable substitute materials is needed, as are expanded recycling facilities, more collection infrastructure, and new delivery models.

The Government has set a target of removing avoidable plastic waste, but the measures currently in place fail to live up to this expectation, and as demonstrated in the *Breaking the Plastic Wave* report, the plastic crisis is only going to worsen.

Radical action is required from the Government to accelerate the pace of change and incentivise a new approach from industry with a host of measures which will tackle plastic production, consumption, and the end product of pollution.

#### **4. Will the UK Government be able to achieve its shorter-term ambition of working towards all plastic packaging placed on the market being recyclable, reusable or compostable by 2025?**

While the Government has set itself the marker of all plastic packaging being recyclable, reusable, or compostable by 2025, the current measures in place do little to instil confidence that this will be achieved. Action to tackle the plastic crisis has been painfully slow, while industry lobby groups have sought to delay and derail measures which will tackle the crisis.

If the Government is to achieve its ambition, it must inject far more urgency in tackling plastic than it is currently doing so. Public opinion is very much of the view that plastic pollution is something which needs to be addressed urgently, however industry has so far failed to take meaningful action to allay their concerns.

A Plastic Planet believes there must be much more pressure placed upon organisations to reduce the amount of plastic they are using, or at least ensure it is recyclable. If the Government is to achieve its ambition it must apply the pressure needed. The implementation of an Extended Producer Responsibility scheme is a good first step, but only if it is delivered with a view to encouraging organisations to change the packaging they use. It can be strengthened further with the introduction of mandatory plastic footprint reporting, where businesses – such as the UK's supermarkets – are required to disclose their plastic use, as well as being required to reach plastic reduction targets.

For example, UK supermarket use some 114 billion pieces of throwaway plastic packaging each year, which equates to 653,000 tonnes of plastic waste.<sup>xv</sup> However, many of the UK's supermarkets fail to provide detailed data on the amount of plastic they use, which has a significant impact on the environment. By introducing mandatory plastic reporting alongside targets to reduce it, there will be far more onus placed on the UK's supermarkets to adhere to the Government's 2025 target.

While it is a positive ambition, A Plastic Planet believes that if the UK is to become a world leader in tackling plastic pollution, it's crucial that the Government takes stronger action to curb its impact.

The Government must try to steer a push away from recyclability (in terms of plastic) as a barometer of a products sustainability credentials. It should encourage reusable packaging and the implementation of refillable schemes. Compostable packaging should be used not as a straight swap for plastic, but with the view that we can use it as a bio-conduit to take food waste to compost. Some 95 percent of our food supply relies on healthy soils, yet they are 23 percent more polluted with plastic than the world's oceans. However, regenerating topsoil and improving its organic carbon content using composted biowaste is a recognised method to sequester CO2 and mitigate climate change as well as boosting productivity and biodiversity. The Government must therefore invest in infrastructure which will see effective collection of compostable materials with food waste, as well as the infrastructure needed to see it processed.

**5. Does the UK Government need to do more to ensure that plastic waste is not exported and then managed unsustainably? If so, what steps should it take?**

Yes. A Plastic Planet believes the Government must go beyond ensuring the UK's plastic waste exports are managed sustainably, and bring an end to them completely.

The UK Government claims it is a world leader in tackling the plastic crisis, but the practice of exporting its plastic waste abroad for recycling defies this. Per capita the UK is the second biggest producer of plastic waste in the world, after the US, however we fail to deal with it ourselves. Two thirds of plastic waste separated for recycling in the UK is sent abroad for processing, with many of those countries receiving it being based in the Global South, despite many of those having inadequate recycling infrastructure to process it. As a result the UK's plastic ends up abroad being incinerated, being dumped in landfill, or worse yet, littering the environment.

In 2019 Turkey received 46 percent of the UK's plastic waste, a total of 154 million kilogrammes. In the first 6 months of 2020, the UK exported 114,000 tonnes of plastic packaging waste to Turkey, nearly 30 percent of all plastic packaging waste exports. Much of this waste was not processed, with an investigation by BBC News finding Britain's plastic waste was being dumped and burned at the side of roads.<sup>xvi</sup>

Fed up with receiving our plastic waste, Turkey acted by implementing a ban on the import of plastic waste for processing in May this year. They joined a growing list of countries who have decided to reject the UK's plastic, including Malaysia – who returned 42 containers of 'illegal' plastic waste to the UK in January 2020,<sup>xvii</sup> and China – who banned the import of plastic waste in 2018.

The practice of plastic waste exports (on a global level) is seeing an increase in harmful criminal behaviour also. Following China's ban on the import of plastic waste, INTERPOL identified that fraudulent activities have increased in frequency and complexity.<sup>xviii</sup>

INTERPOL identified that:

- Plastic waste shipments are falsely declared as destined for recovery, or misdeclared as raw material. In terms of Basel codes, plastic waste shipments are falsely declared as non-hazardous, while it is contaminated or mixed with other waste streams
- Illegally shipped contaminated plastic waste is concealed in the container by being placed behind the "clean" plastic waste that is declared on shipping documents
- Misdeclaration of waste supporting tax evasion

- Misdeclaration of the final destination of plastic waste shipments, using a transit country in a free trade zone

The risks INTERPOL identified going forward included:

- The re-routing of illegal trade to new and more vulnerable countries following upcoming restrictions on plastic waste imports
- The increase in illegal plastic disposal if the Basel Convention amendment on plastic waste trade is not properly implemented starting from 2021
- Criminal activities emerging from new regulations on plastic-derived chemicals and on other waste streams, particularly copper scraps
- New criminal activities related to banned plastic items, photovoltaic panels waste, lead batteries and lithium batteries-related waste

The Government announced it was taking action to curb the impact of its plastic by banning plastic waste exports to countries in the developing world. However, it was [reported](#) that a policy loophole will allow Britain to continue to export its plastic waste to non-OECD countries, despite the Government pledging to stop this practice and our neighbours in the EU now being governed by a ban.<sup>xix</sup>

The UK's commitment to banning plastic waste exports were prompted by international rules, under the Basel convention, to tackle the global trade in plastics, which has seen wealthy nations dump contaminated plastic waste onto poorer ones, which came into force in January. However, the loophole hinders Britain's commitment as its exports will be made under a new system of "prior informed consent", under which the importer has to agree to accept the waste, and has the opportunity to refuse it.

Britain's reliance on exporting its plastic waste means we are never going to invest in infrastructure to process it on home soil. It means there will be less onus placed on reducing our consumption of plastic, which is the most crucial, and effective tool we have in tackling the crisis. Any measures to combat plastic which don't place reducing the annual plastic use of UK residents at the top of the agenda will fail to have the impact intended.

A Plastic Planet believes plastic waste exports only exacerbate plastic pollution. Rather than deal with our own waste, we place it onto others – usually the world's poorest – who are even less equipped to deal with it. We strongly urge the Government to rethink its strategy on plastic waste exports, and seek to end the practice as a matter of urgency.

---

<sup>i</sup> [Packaging News](#)

<sup>ii</sup> [The Guardian](#)

<sup>iii</sup> [BBC News](#)

<sup>iv</sup> [Co-op Blog](#)

<sup>v</sup> [Connexion France](#)

<sup>vi</sup> [Waitrose – Retail Gazette](#)

<sup>vii</sup> [Co-op - Retail Gazette](#)

<sup>viii</sup> [Unilever - Independent](#)

<sup>ix</sup> [Gov.uk Consultation](#)

<sup>x</sup> [EDM 830, Ban on sample sachets](#)

<sup>xi</sup> [EDM 925, Mandatory reporting on plastic packaging](#)

<sup>xii</sup> [Gov.UK Introducing a Deposit Return Scheme](#)

<sup>xiii</sup> [Pew Trust & Systemiq Report, Breaking the Plastic Wave](#)

<sup>xiv</sup> [Carbon Tracker & Systemiq, The Future's Not in Plastics: Why plastics demand won't rescue the oil sector](#)

- 
- xv [Greenpeace UK](#)
  - xvi [BBC News](#)
  - xvii [BBC News - Malaysia](#)
  - xviii [INTERPOL](#)
  - xix [The Guardian](#)