

Written evidence submitted by Defra (PW0061)

EFRA Inquiry: Plastic Waste

Written evidence submitted by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra)

Background

The 25 Year Environment Plan, published in January 2018, sets out the Government's ambition to eliminate all avoidable plastic waste over the lifetime of the plan.

In December 2018 we published the Resources and Waste Strategy, setting out how we will achieve this and transition to a circular economy. It is guided by two overarching objectives:

- Maximising the value of resource use; and
- Minimising waste and its impact on the environment.

We are delivering this through five strategic principles:

- To provide incentives, through regulatory or economic instruments if necessary and appropriate, and ensure the infrastructure, information and skills are in place, for people to do the right thing;
- To prevent waste from occurring in the first place, and manage it better when it does;
- To ensure that those who place on the market products which become waste to take greater responsibility for the costs of disposal – the 'polluter pays' principle;
- To lead by example, both domestically and internationally; and
- To not allow our ambition to be undermined by criminality.

Action to tackle plastic is embedded within the strategy and integrated in the policies we are introducing to make our use of all materials and resources more efficient, with the following strategic objectives particularly on plastic:

- To work towards all plastic packaging placed on the market being recyclable, reusable or compostable by 2025; and
- To eliminate avoidable plastic waste over the lifetime of the 25 Year Environment Plan.

We have made strong progress already, banning problematic plastics such as microbeads in rinse-off personal care products and commonly littered items such as plastic straws, plastic drink stirrers and plastic-stemmed cotton buds. In 2015, we introduced the 5p Single-Use Carrier Bag Charge, leading to a reduction in usage of 95% in the main supermarkets in England by 2020. This charge was increased to 10p and extended to all retailers in May 2021, ensuring we target billions more bags.

The Government recognises the damage caused by plastic pollution, which is why we are going further. Measures under the Environment Bill will enable the government to further reduce the amount of plastic consumed and plastic waste generated, as well as ensuring

more plastic used can be re-used or recycled. These include powers to introduce extended producer responsibility and deposit return schemes, and to establish greater consistency in the recycling system. It will also allow us to place charges on single-use plastic items in addition to plastic carrier bags; set minimum resource efficiency and information requirements for products; and better control the export of plastic waste, including powers to ban the export of plastic waste to non-OECD countries.

More recently, we announced we will consult on banning single-use plastic plates, cutlery and polystyrene beverage containers, another step in reducing consumption of unnecessary plastic and the damage caused by commonly littered plastic items.

Inquiry Questions

- 1. What measures should the UK Government take to reduce the production, consumption 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?***

Single-Use Item Bans and Charges

Since the introduction of the Single-Use Carrier Bags (SUCBs) Charge in October 2015, their usage has reduced by 95% in the main supermarkets. In May 2021, the charge was increased from 5 pence to 10 pence and extended to all retailers, to build on the success of the charge so far and create a level playing field for all retailers. Micro, small and medium sized enterprises (MSMEs) circulated around 3.2 billion SUCB in 2018, accounting for over 80% of the SUCBs in circulation in England. This is expected to reduce SUCBs issued by MSMEs by 80% within 10 years.

In general, we prefer helping people and companies make the right choice, rather than banning things outright and it is ultimately for businesses to decide what packaging and packaging materials they use to supply products to customers. There may, however, be times when a ban is appropriate as part of a wider strategic approach. This is why we introduced measures to restrict the supply of plastic straws, plastic drink stirrers, and plastic-stemmed cotton buds in October 2020. We continue to review the latest evidence on problematic products and/ or materials to enable a systematic approach to reducing unnecessary single-use plastic products, including problematic packaging materials. As a result, we have recently announced our intention to consult on banning single-use plastic plates, cutlery and expanded and extruded polystyrene beverage containers this Autumn.

Collection & Packaging Reforms

New powers provided by the Environment Bill will allow us to introduce Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) for packaging, a Deposit Return Scheme (DRS) for drinks containers, and consistent recycling collections in England. We recently consulted on our proposals for these and are currently considering the responses we received. We will publish the final Government responses in due course.

EPR for packaging aims to encourage industry to reduce the amount of material they use and increase the use of recyclable and reusable alternatives. EPR for packaging would see producers of packaging paying the costs associated with managing the packaging that they place on the market, including at end of life. This is intended to make producers think carefully about the necessity of any packaging they use. It is also proposed that producer's fees would be varied to account for certain criteria, including recyclability, so producers who use easily recyclable packaging will pay less. These measures will provide a strong incentive to these businesses to make more sustainable decisions when designing and using packaging.

The Plastic Packaging Tax (PPT), by HMT, will ensure more packaging on the UK market is made from recycled plastic, in turn supporting further investment in UK recycling. Set at £200 per tonne on packaging with less than 30% recycled content, the tax will be introduced from April 2022 and will incentivise industry to use recyclable plastic waste when producing plastic packaging. This will reduce plastic waste, keep the material within the economic cycle for longer and have significant benefits on climate change issues too.

Further to this, in its 2019 manifesto, the Government committed to introducing a DRS for single-use drinks containers. We expect DRS to deter littering; increase recycling; provide higher quality recycle for reprocessors; and change consumer behaviours with potential beneficial knock-on effects to other environmental activities. The intention is that it will be as easy as possible for consumers to return drinks containers and redeem their deposits. Consumers are charged a deposit up-front when they buy a drink in a container that is in scope of the scheme. The deposit can be redeemed when the empty container is returned. We know that well run deposit return schemes in other countries collect over 90% of plastic drinks bottles placed on the market.

In 2019 we consulted on proposals to increase consistency in recycling collections from households and businesses in England. Following support for these proposals, we have introduced legislation through the Environment Bill requiring English local authorities to collect a consistent set of recycling from households, including plastic packaging. The Environment Bill also requires all businesses in England to make arrangements to recycle the same set of materials. This will help to reduce confusion with recycling, mean more recycled material is available to use in the products we buy, and grow the UK recycling industry.

In May 2021 we published a second consultation on recycling consistency. This consultation included proposals on the plastic recyclable materials in scope of household and business collections. The consultation has now closed, and we are currently analysing responses. We intend to publish our Government response in due course.

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

Materials are not inherently 'good' or 'bad', however, unnecessary or in inappropriate use of materials and their incorrect disposal can cause significant environmental damage. This is why we take an evidence-based and holistic approach to policy making on reducing our

consumption of raw materials and resources and take steps to avoid unintended consequences e.g. from ‘material switching’.

Innovation will be vital in our efforts to tackle plastic pollution and climate change together. Whilst the bioeconomy is already a large part of the UK economy, supporting key industries and generating significant economic impact, the ambition from the Bioeconomy Strategy is to double the size of the bioeconomy by 2030. The development of bio-based plastics, those made from organic sources such as food waste, could be a key part of this, and reduce our reliance on fossil fuels.

The Government welcomes innovations that have a positive impact on the environment and incentivises business-led technology innovation through the UK’s innovation agency, Innovate UK. Innovate UK’s role is to fund business-led innovation through the allocation of competitively awarded grants, delivered through competitions.

The Government put together a package of over £100m for research and innovation to tackle issues arising from plastic waste. £38m was set aside through the Plastics Research and Innovation Fund, the last funding competition of which opened in June 2020. The Resource Action Fund included £10m to pioneer innovative approaches to boosting recycling and reducing litter. £60 million has been allocated to the Industrial Strategy Challenge Fund, alongside £150m from industry, towards the development of smart, sustainable plastic packaging (SSPP), with the aim of making the UK a world-leader in sustainable packaging for consumer products. Two SSPP funding opportunities have been open for bids in 2021: the SSPP Demonstrator Round 2 and the SSPP business-led research and development competition.

In addition, by using evidence gathered from consultations and calls-for-evidence, we can ensure policy decisions are informed by a wide evidence base, are well-considered and have the desired impact. These processes help to build on an existing pool of knowledge, allowing implementation of policy on an evidence-led basis. For example, our upcoming consultation on proposals to ban single-use plastic plates, cutlery and polystyrene beverage containers will seek to explore the issue of alternatives with all stakeholders – within industry, the scientific community, and consumers. We will listen and actively engage with these groups to ensure that the decisions we make do not, simply shift the problem elsewhere. We will continue to explore the implications of shifting customer behaviours as a result of policy decisions.

The issues of plastic consumption and subsequent poor-end-of-life management is a global challenge and not one solely for the UK. As a result, the UK is working collaboratively across borders to find the right solutions and identify suitable alternatives. We continue to engage internationally with our global partners such as the United Nations Environment Assembly to explore the most suitably, environmentally friendly solutions and to ensure we share information, research and evidence at all levels, all the way from individual consumers to other nations.

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

Yes. Eliminating avoidable plastic waste by 2042 is an ambitious target. In their plastic market situation report the Waste and Resource Action Programme (WRAP) estimate 2.36Mt of plastic packaging and 2.5Mt of non-packaging plastic waste was generated in the UK in 2017. This is a significant volume of plastic waste and demonstrates the scale of the challenge we face. We are making progress to meet this target and a recent plastic flow report by Valpak suggested the amount of plastic packaging generated in the UK fell to 2.29Mt in 2019. Our Collection and Packaging Reforms will have a significant impact in helping us meet this target, by increasing recycling and demand for recycled plastic and encouraging greater reuse.

However, this is not the only target we are working towards. As discussed in other questions, we are working towards all plastic packaging being recyclable, reusable or compostable by 2025 (NB: see note on compostable packaging in question 4). In addition, the Environment Bill will require the Government to set at least one long term target in the area of resource efficiency and waste reduction to drive further progress. We are currently considering how a long-term target to reduce residual waste might give appropriate consideration to individual material streams, but the Government wants to ensure we take a holistic approach to reduce consumption of all materials, including plastics.

International Commitments

As well as setting domestic targets, recognising that plastic pollution is a global issue that requires global solutions, we are driving change internationally, through the G7, G20, the Commonwealth and United Nations Environment Assembly. In the “Osaka Blue Ocean Vision”, we committed to reduce additional pollution by marine plastic litter to zero by 2050. In 2018, the UK and Vanuatu launched the Commonwealth Clean Ocean Alliance. This Alliance has grown to a community of 34 countries, over half the Commonwealth, all committed to taking action to reduce plastic pollution in the oceans. Globally we are working towards the long-term elimination of plastic pollution. To accelerate this and achieve the system-change needed the UK supports starting negotiations on a new global agreement to tackle marine litter and plastic pollution at the resumed session of the Fifth UN Environment Assembly.

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?*

We are working towards this ambition through supporting initiatives that encourage industry to act on a voluntary basis and by introducing regulations.

WRAP – UK Plastics Pact

The Government funds the Waste and Resources Action Programme (WRAP), who run The UK Plastics Pact (UKPP). The UKPP is a collaborative initiative to create a circular system that keeps plastic in the economy and out of the natural environment. It was set up in partnership with the Ellen MacArthur Foundation. UKPP members cover the entire plastics value chain and are responsible for 80% of plastic packaging sold through UK supermarkets, and approximately 50% of the total plastic packaging placed on the UK

market. Members have committed to achieve the following targets for plastic packaging by 2025:

- 100% to be reusable, recyclable or compostable
- 70% to be effectively recycled
- 30% average recycled content across all plastic packaging
- Action taken to eliminate problematic or unnecessary single-use plastic packaging items

According to the UKPP, 64% of plastic packaging placed on the market by Pact members is recyclable, demonstrating excellent progress against this target. This, coupled with an increasing number of reuse and refill trials and the phasing-out of hard to recycle black plastic by Pact members, demonstrates industry is taking action.

Collection and Packaging Reforms

In addition to the measures mentioned previously (question 1) encouraging producers to design and use of recyclable packaging under EPR for packaging, obligated producers will be required to achieve ambitious recycling targets for in-scope packaging, with proposals set out in the recent consultation. This included plastic packaging recycling targets, of 41% in 2024 increasing to 56% in 2030.

The recent EPR consultation sought views on the introduction of obligations to encourage the use of re-useable and re-fillable packaging, including on establishing a reuse and refillable packaging policy approach by 2023, with the aspiration of introducing re-use/refill obligations on producers from 2025.

The recent consultation on introducing a DRS also proposed a target for the scheme to achieve a 90% collection rate of in-scope materials to be recycled, with a view to phasing this target in over the first 3 years of the operation of the scheme.

In our recent consultation on 'Consistency in Household and Business Recycling in England,' we consulted on proposals to include plastic films and flexible packaging into household collection services by the end of 2026/27. We also consulted on proposals to introduce plastic films and flexible packaging into business collection services by the end of 2024/25. With around a third of the 2.4mt of plastic packaging being films and flexibles and around half of this consumer packaging, the recyclability of these materials and their collection for recycling is a key consideration in the setting of future targets.

Packaging EPR, together with our proposals for a Deposit Return Scheme for beverage containers and for a core set of materials to be collected from households and businesses for recycling in England, will reduce the amount of difficult to recycle material and increase the supply of good quality material, including used plastic packaging, for recycling.

Compostable plastic

In April 2021, we published our response to the call for evidence on the need for standards for bio-based, biodegradable and compostable plastics and have updated our position on

these materials in light of the evidence and feedback received in response to this call for evidence.

Plastic products can provide proof of compostability by meeting the harmonised European standard, BS EN 13432 or BS EN 14995. Compostable plastics must be treated in industrial composting facilities to be broken down and, when processed incorrectly, can be a source of microplastics and contaminate recycling streams. Stakeholder engagement and responses to our call for evidence highlighted that even when compostable plastics are sent to industrial composters, they are often stripped out along with other plastics and landfilled or incinerated.

As a result, and in line with Government's Resource and Waste Strategy our focus is on increasing the reuse and recycling of plastics, though we recognise there is a valid role for compostable plastics in some niche applications. For example, where the infrastructure required is in place, compostable plastics have the potential to ensure less food waste ends up in landfill where it can emit powerful greenhouse gases. However, we do not think that packaging as a whole constitutes a niche application and will be focusing on working towards all plastic packaging being reusable and recyclable in the first instance, with compostable plastic used only where no other option is available.

The Government's response to the call for evidence can be read in full here: <https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/standards-for-biodegradable-compostable-and-bio-based-plastics-call-for-evidence>

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?

Under UK legislation, businesses involved in the export of waste are required to take all necessary steps to ensure the waste they ship is managed in an environmentally sound manner throughout its shipment and during its recycling. It is illegal to export waste from the UK to be disposed of overseas, apart from in exceptional circumstances, and any UK operators found to be illegally exporting waste can face a two-year jail term and an unlimited fine. There are, therefore, strict controls in place that UK exporters must adhere to.

The Government is committed to dealing with more of our plastic waste at home and we are already taking steps to achieve this. We have committed to banning exports of plastic waste to non-OECD countries and the Environment Bill includes a power which will allow us to deliver on this commitment. We will consult in 2022 on options to deliver the ban. Powers in the Environment Bill will also allow us to go further and make it even harder for criminals to illegally export waste by introducing the 'Electronic Tracking of Waste'. This will make it harder for criminals to circumvent controls through deliberate misdescription of waste. Dealing with more waste domestically will require an increase in reprocessing capacity and the Government has committed to several policies to stimulate investment in this area. The Environment Bill contains further powers allowing us to deliver a 'Deposit Return Scheme' for drinks containers which will allow high quality materials to be collected in greater quantities, 'Extended Producer Responsibility' for packaging which will ensure

producers cover the costs of disposing of packaging waste, and 'Mandating Consistent and Frequent Collection of Recyclable Waste' which will increase the supply of good quality material for recycling.

In addition to the Bill, and as noted earlier HM Treasury (HMT) will introduce a plastic packaging tax from April 2022 that will apply to plastic packaging produced in, or imported into the UK, with less than 30% recycled plastic. This tax will create greater demand for recycled plastic by encouraging the use of recycled plastic content in the manufacture of plastic packaging.

However, there is a global market for waste, a commodity, traded legitimately on the global market. Where the UK cannot currently recycle materials economically, exports can help ensure those materials are recycled rather than landfilled or incinerated. UK businesses are paid by overseas recycling operations for UK waste and based on information submitted by UK exporters to HMRC, plastic waste exports had a value of £96.8m in 2019. The vast majority of plastic waste exported from the UK is recycled and used in the products that UK consumers purchase from abroad. Waste exports currently help to ensure valuable materials are managed sustainably and are not lost to the circular economy.

UK Recycling Capacity

In our 2018 Resources and Waste Strategy, we committed to taking actions which will help stimulate private investment in UK reprocessing and recycling infrastructure as this will help to meet the target of 65% of household waste and waste produced by businesses that is similar to household waste to be recycled by 2035. The major waste reforms of a Deposit Return Scheme for drinks containers, (DRS), Extended Producer Responsibility for packaging (EPR) and consistency in recycling which will be legislated for using powers in the Environment Bill, together with HM Treasury's tax on plastic packaging with less than 30% recycled content, will increase supply and demand for secondary material plastic and therefore increase the need for domestic recycling infrastructure.

The UK Research and Innovation Industrial Strategy Challenge funded by Government has recently invested £20m into four plastic reprocessing facilities in the UK to support the development of new technologies to recycle plastic waste. These projects will increase domestic reprocessing capacity and reduce the levels of plastic waste exported or being sent to landfill and incineration. Three of these projects include the development of chemical recycling plants which turn plastic waste back into oil which can be used to replace virgin oil for use in new plastic products. More information about these projects can be found at: <https://www.ukri.org/news/ukri-funding-puts-uk-at-the-forefront-of-plastic-recycling/>.