

Written evidence submitted by A Plastic Planet (PW0062)

We are grateful to the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Select Committee for inviting us to give evidence. The below memorandum seeks to set out some headline calls to action to supplement our written evidence to the Committee, and which we hope will provide a useful aide memoire for the session.

About A Plastic Planet

A Plastic Planet is an international organisation with a single goal: to turn off the plastic tap. We believe a radical reduction in plastic production is needed to stave off the waste crisis. Since plastic can only be recycled a few times before it becomes useless, it will almost always end up in the environment sooner or later.

In just four years, A Plastic Planet has built a global coalition of experts calling for the adoption of innovative plastic-free packaging solutions for grocery retail such as biomaterials made from wood pulp, plant cellulose, food waste, algae and fungi, as well as other materials including metal, paper, carton board, glass and aluminium.

Context

Less than 9 percent of the UK's plastic waste is recycled in UK, despite Britons consuming huge amounts of it. Per capita the UK is the second biggest producer of plastic waste in the world, after the US. In the UK, an estimated 4.9 million metric tons of plastics are placed on the market each year, of which three-quarters become waste.ⁱ With only a fraction being processed for recycling, the rest goes to landfill, export, incineration, or most likely, the environment.

Despite this plastic production is set to triple by 2040. 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.ⁱⁱ 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 metre of coastline around the world.

Two thirds of plastic waste separated for recycling in the UK is sent abroad for processing, with many of those countries receiving it in the Global South. While A Plastic Planet welcomes government plans to ban exports to non-OECD countries, we call on ministers to go further with a complete ban on plastic waste exports.

A PLASTIC PLANET CALLS TO ACTION

Reduce plastic production to reduce plastic waste

- Reducing plastic at source is the only way of preventing plastic pollution; this means focusing on reducing plastic production
- The Prime Minister is right to say that recycling has not, and will not solve the issue. According to WRAP, 1.5million tonnes of plastic packaging was placed on the market in the consumer sector (grocery and non-grocery retail) in 2019, of which only 584,000 tonnes were collected from households. The remainder (some 900,000 tonnes) appears to have ended up in the environment. The problem is worse still for plastic films of which only 7% were collected.

- In any case, plastic cannot be recycled infinitely. It is actually ‘downcycled’ and will eventually make its way to landfill, incineration or the environment

Government targets

- Voluntary commitments from industry are failing and current Government targets to reduce plastic waste are not ambitious enough. 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 2040ⁱⁱⁱ

New bans on single use plastic

- The Government’s single-use plastics ban is a good start in removing problem plastics, but it needs strengthening, and fast. Plastic sachets are a case in point. 855 billion plastic sachets are used every year around the world. They are difficult if not impossible to recycle due to their composition, contamination and their lack of value. The Global Brand Audit Report found sachets are the most commonly found item of branded plastic waste.
- Plastic-free alternative materials and system changes are readily available and should be adopted at scale. Brands are already seeking to move the market towards these, but regulation has yet to catch-up.

Mandatory common metrics for plastic footprint reporting for UK supermarkets

- UK supermarkets should be required to disclose their plastic use across the supply chain, according to a set of prescribed, common metrics. Amendments to this end were debated in the House of Lords during the passage of the Environment Bill, and the government should now look to introduce similar provision as part of regulations under the Bill.

The Refill Revolution

- Refill schemes in supermarkets across the UK should be encouraged and incentivised, with the view to seeing them adopted at scale. By 2027, government should mandate supermarkets in excess of 400m² to give at least 25% of their floor space to refill technology and plastic-packaging free dispensing systems. This would reflect and improve upon practice in France which is moving to a 20% requirement of this kind by 2030.

Plastic packaging tax and Extended Producer Responsibility

- Funds raised from the Government’s proposed Extended Producer Responsibility scheme and Plastic Packaging Tax should be ringfenced into waste management infrastructure, particularly those which process plastic alternatives, such as the modern anaerobic digestion facilities need to process compostable packaging.
- Where there is confusion on when and where compostable materials should be used, A Plastic Planet has created the *Compostable Conundrum: The Red & Green List*, which gives clear guidance on when they should be used in place of plastic
- In determining what should constitute ‘recycled content’ for the purposes of the new plastic packaging tax, HMRC should ensure ‘chemical recycling’ cannot be used as a means of bypassing the tax.

Plastic waste exports

- The Government must end the UK’s practice of exporting its plastic waste, and instead look towards dealing with its own waste on home soil. Continued exports encourage continued neglect of infrastructure to process waste here. Ministers should seek to end plastic waste exports to all countries as a means of catalysing infrastructure creation.

Sian Sutherland

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ⁱ [Statista](#)

ⁱⁱ [Pew Trust & Systemiq Report, Breaking the Plastic Wave](#)

ⁱⁱⁱ [Pew Trust & Systemiq Report, Breaking the Plastic Wave](#)