

Briefing – Stopping the Plastic Tide

Summary:

On 24th November 2021, the All-Party Parliamentary Sustainable Resource Group (APSRG) held a panel discussion entitled, *Stopping the Plastic Tide: Turning Plastic Marine Pollution Awareness into Action*. This discussion recognised the high level of public awareness around plastic marine pollution, but noted clear action is needed from government, businesses, and consumers to help tackle this persisting issue. It discussed the solutions to reduce plastic pollution from our seas and oceans. Present at the roundtable were parliamentarians, academics, environmental NGOs and representatives from the waste and resources sector.

This discussion helped Policy Connect develop a set of recommendations that contribute towards solutions to reduce plastic marine pollution. Although the discussion was used to inform the below recommendations, these have been formulated solely by, and are only attributable to, Policy Connect.

Recommendations:

1. There needs to be more focus on a circular economy approach in tackling plastic marine pollution, encompassing reduction, redesign, reuse, recycle, and adequate disposal

This discussion raised systemic change through a circular economy rather than through individual piecemeal policies as the key to reducing plastic pollution at source and from eventually reaching our seas and oceans. The Government should firmly embed the principles of the circular economy in its policy framework to reduce plastic pollution. The reduction of plastic consumption is the first crucial step in a circular economy, and this should be encouraged by the Government. The Government's consultation to ban single-use plastics is a welcome step to reduce plastic pollution and is part of a broader move away from a throwaway culture in our society.¹ For a truly circular economy, this should also consider environmentally friendly product substitutions and ensure that these materials do not create a more harmful impact than plastics. Above all, it is single-use culture and the linear economy that should be addressed.

There should be an emphasis on designing products and packaging that requires less plastic or contain a larger share of recycled plastic. The redesigning, reusing, or remanufacturing of plastic products is also something that should be given consideration and is currently not given enough focus by the Government. This shifts the focus away from simply designing plastic products for recyclability. For example, the

¹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/plans-unveiled-to-ban-single-use-plastics>

Government should ban planned obsolescence, introduce longer product guarantees, and encourage product refurbishment.

2. The Government should improve public communication around recycling and littering and empower consumers to have more product choice

The Government's consultation in increasing consistency of collections from households and businesses is a positive step to reduce confusion in what can or cannot be recycled, including plastics.² However, there should also be an effective public communication and awareness campaign alongside the outcome of this consultation as increasing clarity for consumers is crucial in improving waste collection. This should include consistent messaging on recycling, clear labelling, strong messaging against littering, and appropriate waste collection infrastructure.

There is also a lack of consumer choice for consumers who are often faced with limited alternatives to single-use plastic products. The majority of the public want to play their part, recycle more and choose sustainable products, and it is the role of government and businesses to help consumers make these informed choices.

3. Ensure that the Deposit Return Scheme (DRS) is consistent across the UK and give sufficient signals for businesses in time for a well-managed transition

The Deposit Return Scheme (DRS) has unfortunately been delayed due to COVID-19, with anticipation for the scheme's introduction in England, Wales and Northern Ireland to be from late 2024 at the earliest.³ It is important that a DRS is compatible across the UK in terms of timelines and function. This is especially the case as Scotland will likely launch its own separate DRS earlier than other UK nations. This is important in supporting cross border supply chains, addressing the practical challenges of implementation, and minimising confusion for consumers living near nation boundaries. The Government should also be clear on when a DRS will be introduced at the earliest opportunity and outline what the scheme will require from businesses. This strong signal to gives businesses sufficient time to transition in line with the scheme and encourages them to start taking the necessary steps to comply with a DRS.

4. Introduce clear quality assurance criteria to be met by recipient countries of UK plastic waste exports, and ensure that authorities overseeing these regulations have sufficient capacity and funding to enforce them.

The Government's commitment to ban the export of plastic waste to non-OECD countries is welcome. However, 80% of the UK's plastic waste exports is already taken to OECD countries, reducing the overall impact of the measure.⁴ Whilst it is illegal to export plastic waste from the UK unless it is to be recycled or incinerated, there is evidence of the UK's plastic waste being mismanaged once exported to countries such as Turkey and Romania, causing serious harm to those in receiving countries^{5,6}.

² <https://consult.defra.gov.uk/waste-and-recycling/consistency-in-household-and-business-recycling/>

³ <https://consult.defra.gov.uk/environment/consultation-on-introducing-a-drs/>

⁴ <https://www.greenpeace.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Trashed-Greenpeace-plastics-report-final.pdf>

⁵ Ibid

⁶ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/av/world-europe-59557493>

There is also a major concern around the issue of transshipments whereby an increase in plastic waste exports to the EU may then be exported elsewhere to countries with poor waste management facilities.

The Government should go further than the ban to non-OECD countries and introduce a set of clear quality assurance criteria to determine which countries have the capacity to handle UK plastic waste exports in an environmentally responsible manner, and these criteria should be enforced adequately. This should take place as soon as possible in anticipation of a full ban of plastic waste exports. In the UK, producer responsibility obligations for companies do not currently include a requirement to evidence waste at end destinations. This shift in the burden of proof from the point of export to a plastic product being responsibly recycled is therefore crucial.

5. The Government should set a target of net zero exports of plastic waste by 2030. This should be done by increased waste prevention and the scaling up of domestic treatment, recycling, and reprocessing infrastructure.

In addition to immediately ceasing the shipment of plastic waste to countries with low environmental standards, the Government should set a target of net zero exports of plastic packaging waste for 2030 at the latest. This can be achieved by setting split targets for plastic waste exports and domestic reprocessing, and gradually increasing the domestic target to 100% by 2030. The Environment Act now gives the Secretary of State the power to prohibit or restrict the exportation of waste by destination and the Government should take advantage of this.

Therefore, the Government should go further than the ban to non-OECD countries and decrease its reliance on exporting plastic waste entirely, via eliminating all avoidable plastic waste and investing in boosting domestic recycling and remanufacturing capacities.

As Policy Connect's Plastics Packaging Plan emphasised, the Government should seek to create a thriving UK recycling and reprocessing market to reach a circular economy.⁷

6. The UK should take a leading role in international negotiations in reducing plastic marine pollution

The plastic marine pollution crisis has no borders, therefore a concerted effort to prevent plastic from entering our seas and oceans must remain a global effort. Building on the success of the Commonwealth Clean Ocean Alliance and other international initiatives, the UK should take a leadership role and work with international partners to reduce plastic marine pollution. This includes promoting this firmly at the next session of the United Nations Environment Assembly in early 2022. It is also welcome that the UK will co-sponsor a resolution proposed by Peru and Rwanda to start negotiations for a new legally binding global agreement to tackle plastic pollution. The UK should work with international partners to embed the principles of a circular economy within this global agreement.

⁷ <https://www.policyconnect.org.uk/research/plastic-packaging-plan-achieving-zero-waste-exports>

7. The UK should support developing countries in strengthening their waste management systems

Around two billion people in the world do not have access to waste collection services⁸. This lack of adequate waste management infrastructure causes severe problems in many developing countries, leading to waste material escaping to the environment, including oceans. It also gives ground to the parallel problem of the open burning of waste, an important source of carbon emissions. Working internationally to tackle this, the UK should support developing countries in improving their waste management systems.

8. Invest in the chemical recycling of plastic technologies

While the scaling up of mechanical recycling of plastics to prevent it from reaching our seas and oceans should remain a priority, chemical recycling and innovative technologies to reduce plastic pollution should also receive investment and research funding. The Centre for Enzyme Innovation at the University of Portsmouth for example is working to develop enzyme-based, low carbon, bio-recycling solutions to tackle plastic pollution.⁹ These enzymes have been found to break down waste plastic polymers which are then purified and re-polymerised, allowing the recycling of materials as part of a circular plastics economy.

9. Fund research into the impacts of plastic on human health

There is a high level of awareness on the impact of plastic pollution towards marine health and marine biology, but research should also be undertaken to explore its health impacts on humans. It is currently unclear what overall impact plastic pollution has on human health, but early research has highlighted this as an area of concern, including the ingestion of microplastics.¹⁰

⁸ <https://www.oecd.org/stories/ocean/investing-in-waste-management-0e012755>

⁹ <https://www.port.ac.uk/research/research-centres-and-groups/centre-for-enzyme-innovation>

¹⁰ <https://commonseas.com/programmes/healthy-me-healthy-sea#:~:text=Healthy%20Me%2C%20Healthy%20Sea%20conducts,use%20and%20dispose%20of%20them.>