

Research Briefing

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Plastic waste



Summary

- 1 Plastic types, uses and sizes
- 2 Statistics on plastic waste
- 3 The environmental problems of plastic waste
- 4 The benefits of plastic packaging
- 5 Legal framework for dealing with plastic waste
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- 7 Next steps: government proposals on plastic waste
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Summary

Statistics on plastic packaging and recycling

The climate and resources charity WRAP sets out that around [two-thirds of all plastic packaging comes from consumer goods and plastic bottles were the largest single source](#) of this. An estimated 73% of the plastic bottles produced in 2020/21 were collected from households for recycling. The rate was 47% for pots, tubs and trays and much lower for plastic film at just 4%.

[UK exports of plastic waste for recycling peaked in 2011](#). The largest destinations of exports of plastic waste in 2023 were Turkey and the Netherlands. Domestic recycling of plastic waste has increased in recent years and overtook exports in 2021 for the first time in almost two decades.

Environmental problems and benefits

[Plastic waste](#) often does not decompose and can last centuries in landfill, or else ends up as litter in the natural environment, which in turn can pollute soils, rivers and oceans, and harm the creatures that inhabit them. There has also been concern raised that microplastics (plastic particles that are smaller than 5 millimetres in size) have an adverse impact on the health of humans and animals, although, as the [Royal Society notes further evidence is needed](#) on this issue.

[Plastic packaging does have benefits](#). This includes contributing to food safety and hygiene and in some circumstance, reduces food waste by prolonging the lifespan of foods. It can reduce packaging weight in transit and thereby reducing energy and emissions that would be generated by using alternative materials.

Government ambitions and targets

In 2018 the UK [Government](#) set a strategic ambition to “...work towards all plastic packaging placed on the market being recyclable, reusable or compostable by 2025.” This followed on from and was intended to support [commitments](#) to leave the environment in a better condition for the next generation and, in particular:

- an “ambition” of zero avoidable waste by 2050
- a “target” of eliminating avoidable plastic waste by end of 2042.

The UK Government’ January 2023 [Environmental Improvement Plan 2023](#) set a target to ensure that residual municipal plastic waste does not exceed 42 kg per capita annually, by 31 January 2028. This is equivalent to a 45%

reduction from 2019 levels. Residual waste is waste that is sent to landfill, put through incineration or used in energy recovery in the UK or overseas.

The devolved administrations in [Scotland](#), [Wales](#) and [Northern Ireland](#) each have their own ambitions on plastic waste and plans to move towards a more circular economy.

Government proposals for change

The UK Government's December 2018 [Resources and Waste Strategy](#) contained a number of policies aimed at reducing plastic waste. A range of consultations have followed on individual policy areas, some of which have been UK-wide or jointly with the devolved administrations.

As part of this work a new [UK-wide plastic packaging tax](#) took effect from 1 April 2022. It is designed to encourage the use of recycled rather than new plastic within plastic packaging.

Other policy proposals that have not yet been introduced are:

- Introducing a deposit return scheme (joint scheme for England, Wales and Northern Ireland). The Scottish Government has consulted separately on its own proposals. Schemes are expected to start from October 2025.
- Simplifying recycling collections in England to ensure a consistent set of materials is collected across local authorities. This is expected to start from 31 March 2026 for households and from 31 March 2025 for non-household municipal premises.
- Revising the existing extended producer responsibility (EPR) scheme in the UK. EPR is about incentivising packaging producers to take financial responsibility for the end recycling of their products. The main change in the revised scheme will be that the full cost of collecting, sorting, recycling and disposing of household packaging waste will be placed on packaging producers rather than local authorities. These fees will vary depending on the amount and type of packaging used, with lower fees for packaging that uses more easily recyclable material. The new scheme is expected to start from October 2025.

Separately the UK and devolved governments have introduced several different pieces of legislation to ban certain single use plastic products, including single-use plastic plates, cutlery, cotton buds and balloon sticks, with further restrictions proposed on items including single use vapes and wet wipes containing plastic.

Plastics in the marine environment

Estimates vary as to how much plastic is in the world's oceans, marine or aquatic environments. In 2021 the [United Nations Environment Programme \(UNEP\)](#) [estimated that there were 75 to 199 million tonnes of plastic](#) in oceans

across the world. A November 2023 [OECD report \(PDF\)](#) estimated there were [around 152 million tonnes of plastic](#) in aquatic environments in 2020.

The UK Government is involved at an international level with a range of initiatives to tackle ocean plastics. For example, in March 2022, at the United Nations Environment Assembly, heads of state, ministers of environment and other representatives from 175 nations [signed a resolution committing to developing an international legally binding agreement](#) (PDF), by 2024, that addresses the full lifecycle of plastic pollution.

EU strategy for plastics

In December 2019 the European Commission published a European “[Green Deal](#)” and a new [Circular Economy Action Plan \(CEAP\)](#), which includes further proposals to reduce plastic litter and improve recycling. The CEAP seeks to ensure that “all packaging on the EU market is reusable or recyclable in an economically viable way by 2030”.

As part of its European Green Deal work, the European Commission has [proposed to revise the Packaging and Packaging Waste Directive](#) and set a headline target to reduce packaging waste by 15% by 2040 per Member State per capita, compared to 2018. This is anticipated to lead to an overall waste reduction in the EU of 37% compared to a scenario without changing the legislation.

Plastics exports

The UK has various obligations under international and national law relating to the shipment of waste abroad, particularly under the [UN Basel Convention on the Control of Transboundary Movements of Hazardous Waste and their Disposal](#) (the Basel Convention). The Basel Convention was amended to require that, from 1 January 2021, a Prior Informed Consent procedure is used for the shipment of certain types of plastic waste. These amended rules apply across the UK.

The UK Government also had a [2019 Manifesto commitment](#) to “ban” the export of plastic waste to non-OECD (The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) countries. Provision for this has been included in the [Environment Act 2021](#) and will be subject to further consultation. It would be applicable across the UK. Further [consultation will happen before the provisions come into force](#).

Plastics terminology

In July 2018 WRAP published a guide, [Understanding plastic packaging and the language we use to describe it](#), setting out some of the terminology problems of describing plastic. In particular, the guide explains how names given to plastics do not necessarily dictate the way the plastic will behave at the end of its life, for example that the term “bioplastic” does not automatically mean it will biodegrade (break down naturally).

On 22 July 2019 the UK Government published [Standards for biodegradable, compostable and bio-based plastics: call for evidence](#) to inform its understanding of the scientific evidence available and where there were gaps. A [summary of responses and government response](#) to this consultation was published in April 2021. In relation to oxo-biodegradable plastics, (plastics with an added additive to aid biodegradation, but which may not fully degrade) the government said that it was minded to ban these materials, subject to further consultation. No further consultation has yet been published.

1 Plastic types, uses and sizes

There are several hundred different types of plastics, each with different properties that are designed for specific applications. Some of the most common types that are relevant to this briefing are:

- [Polyethylene](#) (PE): polyethylene can be manufactured in varying densities. Each different density of polyethylene gives the final plastic unique physical properties:¹
 - [Low-Density Polyethylene](#) (LDPE), used to make film for packaging and carrier bags
 - [Medium-Density Polyethylene](#) (MDPE), used in heavier weight carrier bags and ‘squeezy’ plastic bottles
 - [High-Density Polyethylene](#) (HDPE), used to make milk bottles, drinks containers and bottle tops
- [Polyethylene Terephthalate](#) (PETE or PET): this is a form of polyester that is commonly used to make synthetic fibres, plastic bottles, and other food packaging²
- [Polypropylene](#) (PP), used to make buckets, bowls, crates, and toys
- [Expanded Polystyrene](#) (EPS), widely used to make lightweight food containers and packaging

The above plastics are generally fossil based, that are made from a wide range of polymers derived from petrochemicals. Plastic can also be bio-based, meaning that polymers are derived from plant-based sources such as starch and cellulose.³ The nature of the material used to make a plastic does not necessarily dictate the way it will behave at the end of its life. For example, a bio-based plastic or bioplastic does not automatically mean it will biodegrade.⁴

There has been particular concern about a group of plastics called ‘oxo degradable’ plastics. Oxo-degradable plastics are plastic materials that include additives which, through oxidation, lead to the fragmentation of the plastic material into micro-fragments.⁵ The concern relates to the use of the term ‘degradable’ which implies that it breaks down completely, whereas

¹ A&C Plastics, [7 Different Types of Plastic](#) (accessed 18 March 2024)

² The Plastic Bottles Company, [What is PET plastic?](#) (accessed 18 March 2024)

³ WRAP, [Understanding plastic packaging and the language we use to describe it](#), Sept 2020

⁴ WRAP, [Understanding plastic packaging and the language we use to describe it](#), Sept 2020, p2

⁵ Royal Society of Chemistry, [Additives for degradable plastics](#) (accessed 18 March 2024)

there is increasing evidence to suggest that micro plastics may remain for a long time.⁶ For more on this issue see section 13.2 of this briefing.

The Environment Agency's report, [Plastics: challenges for the water environment](#) (October 2021) explains the different sizes of plastic that can enter the environment:

- macro plastic items, which includes larger plastic items such as plastic bottles
- micro plastic particles such as plastic bio-beads (used industrially, including in sewage treatment) and small plastic particles (less than 5mm diameter). Micro-plastics also arise from textile fibres, tyre and road wear particles, and the breakdown of litter and other macro-plastics.
- nano plastic, a subset of micro-plastics comprising the smallest particles. While there isn't a formal definition, generally this includes plastic particles less than 1 µm (micrometre, a length equal to 0.001 mm diameter). Nano plastics often arise from the breakdown of larger materials, for example tyres and synthetic textiles.

⁶ HM Government, [Standards for bio-based, biodegradable, and compostable plastics: Government response](#), April 2021, p17-18

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Statistics on plastic waste

Box 1: WRAP Plastics Market Situation Report 2022

The not-for-profit-organisation, the Waste and Resources Action Programme (WRAP) produced a [Plastics Market Situation Report 2022](#), published October 2023. This report provides in-depth information on economic, market and regulatory trends affecting the capture and recycling of plastics in the UK.

2.1

Plastic packaging waste and recycling

UK

Official estimates of the UK's plastic packaging waste recycling rate are given below. The recycling/ recovery rate generally increased each year from around 35% in 2012 to 47% in 2020. The 2021 data includes recycling only, so is not directly comparable to earlier years.

Plastic packaging waste in the UK million tonnes			
	Produced	Recovered or recycled	% recycled/ recovered
2012	2.55	0.64	25.2%
2013	2.26	0.71	31.6%
2014	2.22	0.84	37.9%
2015	2.26	0.89	39.4%
2016	2.26	1.02	44.9%
2017	2.26	1.04	46.2%
2018	2.36	1.03	43.8%
2019	2.47	1.14	46.2%
2020	2.49	1.17	47.2%
2021	2.51	1.11	44.2%

Note: Data for 2021 only include packaging recycled

Source: Defra, [UK statistics on waste, 2023 update](#) (Table 4)

The climate action NGO WRAP (formerly the Waste and Resources Action Programme) has slightly lower estimates of the amount of plastic packaging

produced or ‘placed on the market’. In 2021 it estimated the total at 2.21 million tonnes. 65% of this was consumer packaging (mainly grocery). The next largest sources were the manufacturing and other with 17%, followed by hospitality (9%) and non-consumer retail (5%).⁷

Plastic bottles made up 40% of the tonnage of consumer plastic packaging placed on the market in 2021. Plastic film was next most important with 24% followed by plastic pots, tubs and trays with 21%. Plastic film made up the largest single source of non-consumer plastic packaging with 42%.⁸

WRAP estimates that 50% of plastic packaging produced in the UK in 2021 was recycled either at home or abroad. This rate was around 10% in 2021, but has not changed since 2019.⁹ It provisionally estimates that the rate will increase to 55% in 2022, but add that the “incremental” growth in UK recycling capacity falls short of the amount needed to meet the [UK Plastics Pact](#) recycling target of 70% by 2025.¹⁰

The data on the amount of packaging waste produced are industry estimates. Alternative estimates of plastic waste recycling use higher figures for the amount produced. A report by Eunomia estimated that the actual volume produced was around 3.5 million tonnes in 2015 with a possible range of 3.1-3.9 million tonnes. Their central estimate is more than 50% above the figure used in the official statistics for 2015-2017. Around two-thirds of this waste is collected by local authorities, mainly from households. Eunomia’s calculation includes an estimate of plastics in the general household waste stream. With this higher estimate of waste produced the resulting recycling rate falls to 23-29% in 2015.¹¹

A report for WWF¹² calculated that total plastic waste generation in the UK (not just packaging) was around 4.9 million tonnes in 2014 and could increase to around 6.3 million tonnes by 2030. Plastic packaging made up two-thirds of estimated plastic waste in 2014 (3.3 million tonnes).

A 2018 report by the National Audit Office also questioned the Government’s data on packaging waste. It said:¹³

However, the Department’s estimates of packaging recycling rates are not sufficiently robust. The Department does not adjust its figures to account for undetected fraud and error. In order to determine the amount of packaging that is recycled each year, the Department uses the data that reproprocessors and exporters report when claiming recovery notes. While the Agency does correct this data when it finds problems, we do not consider it is realistic to assume that undetected fraud and error is negligible: there is a financial

⁷ WRAP, [Plastic Market Situation report 2022](#), (Table 1)

⁸ WRAP, [Plastic Market Situation report 2022](#), (Tables 2 & 3)

⁹ WRAP, [Plastic Market Situation report 2022](#), p12

¹⁰ WRAP, [The UK Plastics Pact Annual Report 2022-23](#), p24

¹¹ Eunomia, [Plastic Packaging – Shedding Light on the UK Data](#), 2018

¹² Eunomia, [A Plastic Future – Plastics Consumption and Waste Management in the UK \(PDF\)](#), 2018

¹³ NAO, [The packaging recycling obligations](#), 2018

incentive for companies to over-claim, and a particular risk that some of the material exported overseas is not fully recycled...

We are concerned that the reported recycling rate for plastic packaging could be overstated, although not by enough to undermine achievement of the overall target.

Local authority plastic recycling

According to WRAP local authorities across the UK collected 0.61 million tonnes of plastic packaging from households for recycling in 2020/21. This was up by 4% on the amount collected in 2019/20 and around half of the UK total from all sources shown in the earlier table.¹⁴

In 2021/22 all local authorities in the UK collected plastic bottles for recycling,¹⁵ 83% collected plastic pots, tubs and trays, 16% at least one type of plastic film (such as cling film, carrier bags or food bags) and 5% collected all types of plastic films.¹⁶ WRAP estimates that the collection rate¹⁷ for plastic bottles in 2020/21 was 73% and 47% for plastic pots, tubs and trays.

2.2

Exports of plastic waste

Up to 2010 the UK mainly increased its plastic packaging recycling through exports. WRAP says that since 2010 growth has mainly come from domestic recycling which increased by 240% between then and 2021. The continued growth in domestic recycling, combined with a fall in exports, meant that in 2021 more plastic packaging was recycled in the UK than exported. This was the first time it had happened since 2003.¹⁸

In 2023 the UK exported 0.57 million tonnes of plastic waste. The amount exported increased rapidly in the decade to its 2011 peak of almost 0.9 million tonnes. The following chart shows that it has generally fell over the following decade, but has increased in the past two years to its highest level since 2018.

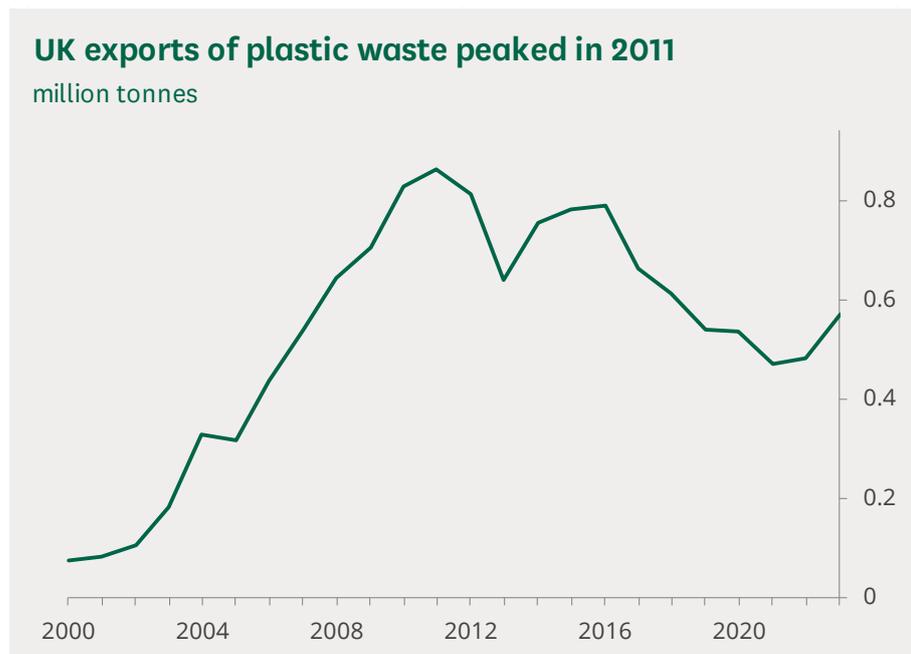
¹⁴ WRAP, [Plastic Market Situation report 2022](#), (Table 4)

¹⁵ In at least one of their kerbside collection schemes. This does not mean that all households would be covered by these schemes.

¹⁶ WRAP, [Plastic Market Situation report 2022](#), (Tables 6 & 9)

¹⁷ The tonnage from kerbside collections as a proportion of the estimates amount 'placed on the market' in the same year.

¹⁸ WRAP, [Plastic Market Situation report 2022](#), pp11-13



Source: [UK Trade Info](#)

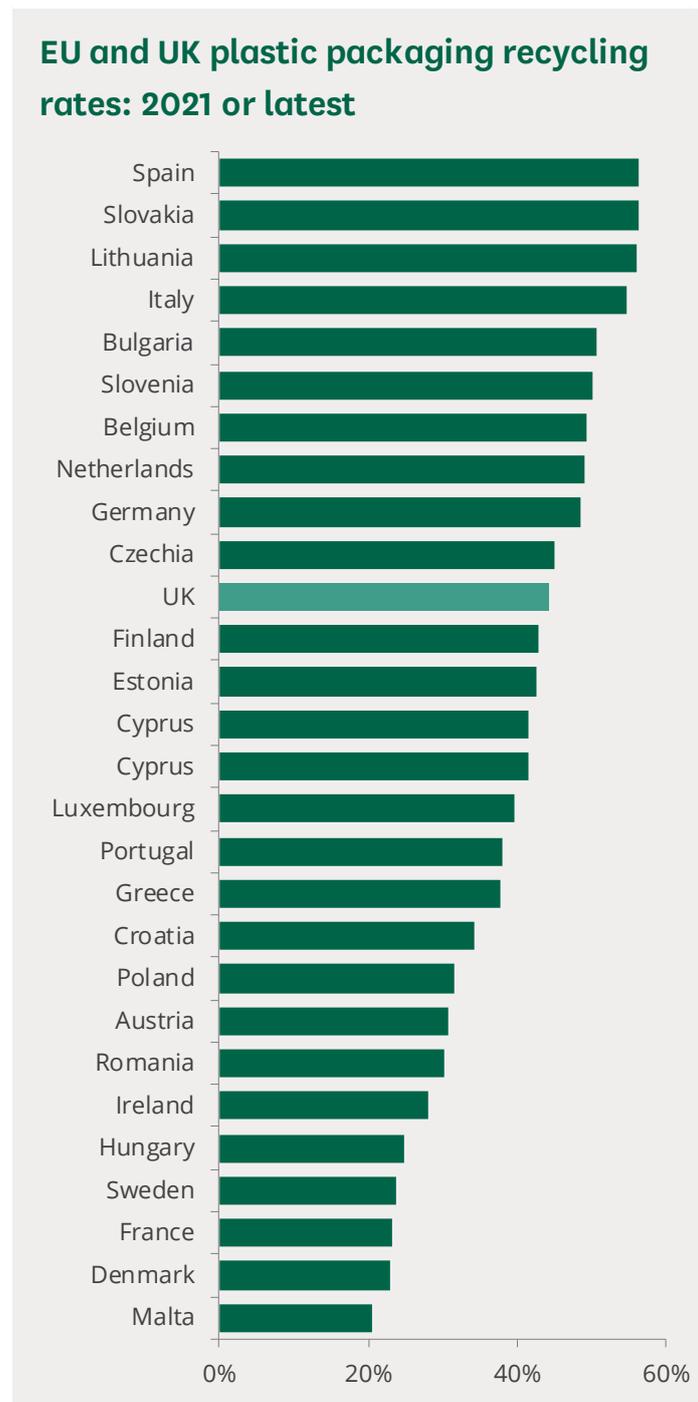
Until the mid-2010s the most important destination for exported plastic waste was China/Hong Kong. Much of the expansion of waste exports went to China/Hong Kong and these exports accounted for more than 80% of the total in each year 2005 to 2012. They fell in importance after 2013, but were still the largest single destination in 2017 with 37% of the total. The decision by China to ban imports of certain types of waste for recycling from 2018 saw UK exports to China fall by more than 90% in 2018. There were no exports of plastic waste to mainland China in 2023 and the amount to Hong Kong was 0.01% of all exports of this material.

Plastic waste exports from the UK initially shifted to Malaysia after the Chinese ban, but have since shifted to Turkey and some EU countries. In 2023 Turkey was the largest destinations with 25%, followed by the Netherlands (21%), Germany (10%) and Spain (6%).¹⁹

International comparisons of recycling rates

The chart below shows the latest plastic recycling rates for EU members and the UK. The UK's rate in 2021 was higher than the EU27 average of 39.7%, but below levels in some larger members including Spain, Italy and Germany.

¹⁹ HMRC [UK Trade Info \(HS commodity code 3915\)](#)



Sources: EUROSTAT, [Waste database](#); Defra, [UK statistics on waste, 2023 update](#) (Table 4)

3 The environmental problems of plastic waste

The environmental implications of plastic pollution are wide-ranging. Plastic waste often does not decompose and so can last for centuries in landfill. Habitats are degraded when chemicals leach from plastic and animals suffer after getting caught in or having ingested plastic.²⁰

3.1 Energy use and emissions

A February 2019 government consultation framed the environmental impact of plastic packaging in terms of the energy and emissions used to create new plastic. It stated that using new plastic typically has greater environmental impact than using recycled material, because it requires greater resource extraction and processing, with higher energy use and emissions.²¹

A May 2023 report from the international organisation, the OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development), [Climate change and plastics pollution](#) (PDF), found that globally, 93 percent of plastics are produced with fossil fuels. Six percent are made from recycled plastics and the remainder are biobased plastics.²²

The OECD stated that the production, conversion and waste management of plastics generate about 4 percent of total greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions. Of these, 90% could be attributed to the production and conversion stage of the plastics lifecycle.²³ The report projects that with increasing plastics use and waste, these emissions are projected to more than double by 2060, reaching 4.5 percent of global GHG emissions, in the absence of new policies.²⁴

²⁰ HM Government, [Our Waste, Our Resources: A Strategy for England](#), December 2018, p22

²¹ HM Treasury, [Plastic Packaging Tax: Consultation](#), 18 February 2019, p3

²² OECD, [Climate change and plastics pollution](#) (PDF), May 2023, p2

²³ OECD, [Climate change and plastics pollution](#) (PDF), May 2023, p2

²⁴ OECD, [Climate change and plastics pollution](#) (PDF), May 2023, p6

3.2

Human health and wellbeing

The Government Office for Science's [Foresight Future of the Seas: Final Report](#), March 2018, set out the impact of coastal plastic pollution on human health and wellbeing:

High levels of plastic pollution can affect health and wellbeing in several ways. Litter left or washed up on the coast can impact upon residents' quality of life by reducing recreational opportunities, and can deter coastal visitors. This reduces their access to the health benefits associated with outdoor activity, as well as potentially affecting the tourism industry. A recent EU-wide survey demonstrated that over 70 per cent of visitors noticed litter on either most or every visit to the coast. In the UK during 2010 around 40 per cent of local authorities undertook beach cleaning with annual costs in the region of £15.5 million. The uninhabited Henderson Island, one of the Pitcairn Islands, was recently found to have the highest density of man-made debris of anywhere in the world, with 99.8 per cent of it plastic. Coastal plastic litter can also increase the risk of bacterial pathogens such as *E. coli*. However there is currently no evidence that microplastics in seafood pose a threat to human health.²⁵

An Environment Agency report [Plastics: challenges for the water environment](#) (2021) highlighted that the impacts of plastics on human health via the food chain are not well known. It stated that "better understanding the effects on wildlife is an important research gap", and that "studies on the potential impacts on human health and ecosystems are likely to take a number of years."²⁶ The scientific fellowship organisation, the Royal Society, has also noted concerns that microplastics may also act as a vehicle for transporting harmful chemicals into humans and other animals, but stated that the evidence for this is "much less clear, and the subject of much debate." It also said that "there is not yet conclusive evidence that microplastics affect human health, or cause significant harm to people."²⁷

A 2019 report, [No Time to Waste: Tackling the Plastic Pollution Crisis Before it's Too Late](#), from international relief and development agency Tearfund, conservation charity Fauna & Flora International (FFI), the Institute of Development Studies, and waste management charity WasteAid examined the impact of plastic pollution on health. It suggested that vulnerable people in low-income countries were worst affected by waste pollution (not specifically plastic waste):

Plastic pollution is creating a growing public health emergency in many towns and cities around the world, and the poorest and most vulnerable people are most at risk. The impacts of unmanaged waste on human health have been less publicised than the environmental impacts, but they are equally devastating. At least 30 diseases can be associated with uncollected waste, of which plastic is a growing component. Several of these diseases are primary causes of death and sickness in low- and middle-income countries. Indeed,

²⁵ Government Office for Science, [Foresight, Future of the Seas: Final Report](#), March 2018, p80

²⁶ Environment Agency, [Plastics: challenges for the water environment](#), October 2021, p9

²⁷ Royal Society, [Microplastics in freshwater and soil](#) (accessed 13 March 2024)

new research by Tearfund suggests that between 400,000 and 1 million people die each year in low- and middle-income countries because of diseases related to mismanaged waste. At the upper end, that is one person every 30 seconds.²⁸

3.3 Marine environment

The government's 25 Year Environment Plan (January 2018) highlighted how plastic can have a negative impact in the marine environment:

Turtles choke on plastic bags because they mistake them for a jellyfish. Dolphins drown, tangled up in discarded plastic packaging. Albatrosses somehow find floating rice bags in the furthest reaches of the South Atlantic, far from human populations, and unwittingly feed them to their hungry chicks on the island of South Georgia. Millions of single-use bottles jostle their way around the oceans, carried on the currents even to the remotest and most fragile Pacific atolls. Latest estimates suggest that around 12 million tonnes of plastics enter the oceans each year. The annual cost of marine plastic pollution is estimated to be at least \$4.7 billion to the consumer goods industry alone.²⁹

Further information about marine plastics is provided in section 10 of this briefing.

²⁸ Tearfund, Fauna & Flora International (FFI), Institute of Development Studies, and WasteAid, [No Time to Waste: Tackling the Plastic Pollution Crisis Before it's Too Late](#), May 2019

²⁹ HM Government, [A Green Future: Our 25 Year Plan to Improve the Environment](#), January 2018, p92

4 The benefits of plastic packaging

The British Plastics Federation's (BPF) position is that single use plastics have an important role to play in "modern life".³⁰ It emphasises that plastics packaging saves resources and, "it is lighter, uses less energy and produces less greenhouse gas emissions than alternatives."³¹

A paper published by the BPF in 2018, [Plastic Packaging: Frequently Asked Questions](#) summarises the benefits of plastic packaging:

- Resource efficient
- Safe
- Hygienic
- Light weight
- Secure
- Durable
- Versatile
- Recyclable³²

The BPF paper provides further information under each of the above headings. There is also a [series of FAQs about plastic packaging](#) on the BPF website.

4.1 Food hygiene

The BPF has stated that, "Plastic packaging ensures a high level of hygiene. It can provide a barrier against air or moisture and can help to optimize humidity. With good puncture resistance and sealing, it can also provide a modified, protective atmosphere or a vacuum, and can even remove oxygen emitted by the product to further increase shelf life."³³

An article from Talk Retail, [5 reasons why packaging is important in securing food safety](#), also lists some of the advantages of food packaging. In particular

³⁰ British Plastic Federation website, [Plastic Packaging and the Environment](#) (accessed 18 March 2024)

³¹ British Plastics Federation, [Plastic Packaging: Frequently Asked Questions](#), 2018

³² British Plastics Federation, [Plastic Packaging: Frequently Asked Questions](#), 2018, p4

³³ BPF, [Is it better to buy goods with no packaging?](#) (accessed 18 March 2024)

it noted the role that packaging can play in reducing contamination and preventing tampering.³⁴

4.2 Established recycling infrastructure

An article from [PackagingEurope](#) highlighted concern from waste recovery company, Veolia, that banning plastic packaging would lead to alternative types of packaging being used which may also be a “challenge” to recycle.³⁵

Similarly, the oil company BP has argued that plastics may do less harm than alternative forms of packaging. In the BP Energy Outlook 2019, the company said that in the case of a single use plastics ban, overall energy consumption and emissions could increase unless there was “widespread deployment of efficient collection and reuse systems” of alternative materials.³⁶

4.3 Environmental cost of replacement material

A July 2022 report from consultants McKinsey & Company examined the total greenhouse gas (GHG) contribution from several plastic products versus their alternatives.³⁷ This examined looked at product life cycle (cradle to grave) and impact of use (excluding ocean pollution). The report summary concluded that many plastic products had GHG savings over alternative products made from other materials:

Among applications for which nonplastic alternatives are used at scale, the plastics examined in this paper offer lower total GHG contribution compared with alternatives in 13 of 14 cases (exhibit). GHG savings range from 10 to 90 percent, considering both product life cycle and impact of use. In addition, in many applications, particularly those concentrated in food packaging, there are few alternatives to plastics today. In fact, plastics adoption in the near term can help decarbonization efforts in these areas, particularly in terms of food spoilage and energy efficiency, given their lower GHG footprint.³⁸

In a 2016 report, environmental consultants Trucost highlighted that more of an alternative material is often needed to perform the same function as any plastic that it is replacing:

The environmental cost of plastic in consumer goods is 3.8 times less than the alternatives materials that would be needed to replace plastic. Although alternative materials such as glass, tin, aluminium and paper are viable

³⁴ Talk Retail, [5 reasons why packaging is important in securing food safety](#), 14 June 2021

³⁵ Packaging Europe, [Mixed Reception to UK Government Plan](#), 12 January 2018

³⁶ BP, [Energy Outlook 2019](#), p35

³⁷ McKinsey & Company, [Climate Impact of Plastics](#), 6 July 2022

³⁸ McKinsey & Company, [Climate Impact of Plastics](#), 6 July 2022

alternatives to plastic in many consumer goods applications, they have higher environmental costs in the quantities needed to replace plastic.

(...)

For example, a typical plastic soft drink bottle contains 30 grams of plastic. But if replaced by a weighted average mix of alternative materials currently used in the market, an equivalent capacity bottle would require 141 grams of alternative materials such as glass, tin or aluminium in the USA. Extrapolating to the entire consumer goods sector, over 342 Mt of alternative material would be needed to replace the 84 Mt of plastic used in consumer products and packaging in 2015.³⁹

³⁹ Trucost, [Plastics and Sustainability: A Valuation of Environmental Benefits, Costs and Opportunities for Continuous Improvement](#), 2016, p7

5 Legal framework for dealing with plastic waste

Much of the UK's current waste legislation originates from EU legislation. In particular, the EU Waste Framework Directive ([2008/98/EC](#)) provided the framework under which waste management policy was implemented (Member states were required to implement the directive into national law by 12 December 2010). Although the Waste Framework Directive applied to the UK as a whole, waste is a devolved matter, so the requirements were transposed into law in each part of the UK separately.

Following the UK's departure from the EU and the end of the transition period, most of these laws remain as assimilated laws in domestic legislation in accordance with the [EU \(Withdrawal\) Act 2018](#) (as amended) and subsequent regulations.

5.1 The waste management hierarchy

Box 2: What is a circular economy?

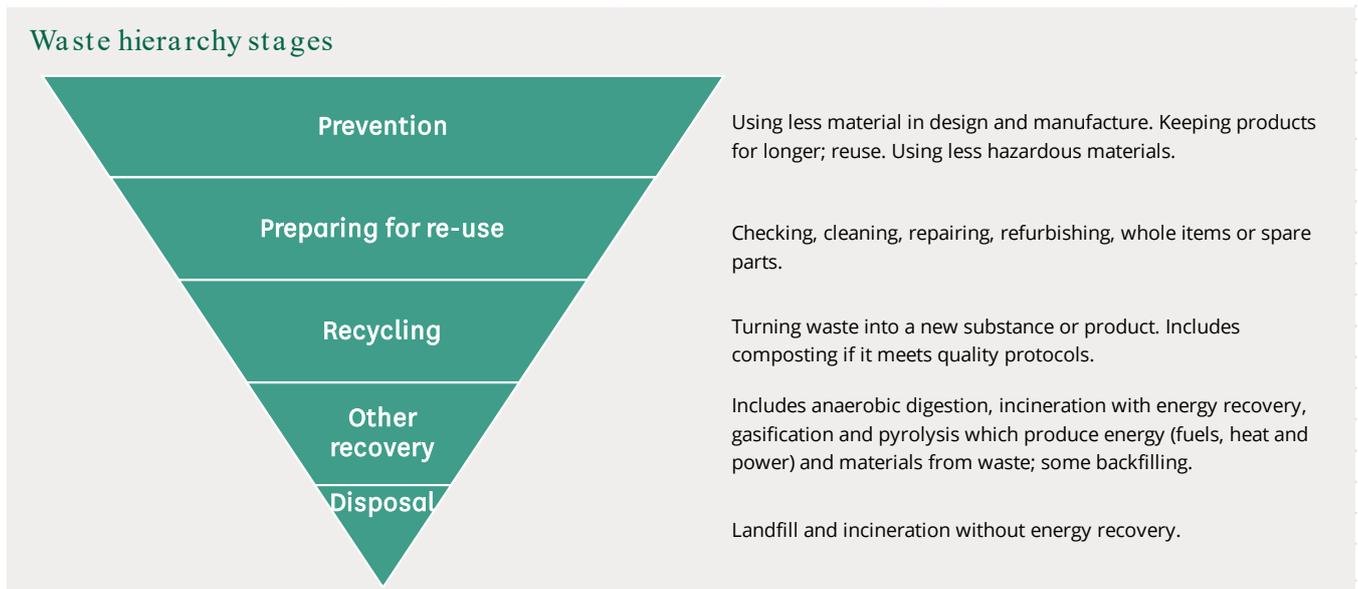
A circular economy means re-using, repairing, refurbishing and recycling existing materials and products, and regarding waste as something that can be turned into a resource. It maximises the value of resources to benefit both the economy and the environment. This contrasts with a linear “take-make-consume-dispose” model which assumes that resources are abundant, available and cheap to dispose of.

For further information about the circular economy concept see POSTnote, [Designing a Circular Economy](#), September 2016.

An overarching requirement of the EU Waste Framework Directive was that the UK applied the waste management hierarchy. This sets out the order of priority to apply to products and waste and shows that prevention and re-use options should be considered before recycling.⁴⁰ This is in line with moving towards the aims of a circular economy. The waste hierarchy is depicted by Defra as follows and it applies to waste in general, not just plastic:⁴¹

⁴⁰ EU Waste Framework Directive, Article 4

⁴¹ Defra, [Guidance on applying the Waste Hierarchy](#), June 2011



The waste hierarchy is implemented in the UK through:

- Regulation 12 and schedule 1 of [The Waste \(England and Wales\) Regulations 2011](#) (SI no.988)
- Paragraph 3 of Part 1 of Schedule 9 to the [Environmental Permitting \(England and Wales\) Regulations 2016](#) (SI no.1154)
- [The Waste \(Scotland\) Regulations 2012](#) (SI no.148)
- The [Waste Regulations \(Northern Ireland\) 2011](#) (SI no.127)

5.2 Extended Producer responsibility

Producer responsibility is a way of incentivising packaging producers to take financial responsibility for the end recycling of their products, rather than local authorities and taxpayers. Packaging is any material used to hold, protect, handle, deliver or present goods. It covers a wide range of material beyond just plastic, encompassing paper, glass, aluminium, steel and wood.

Under the EU Packaging and Packaging Waste Directive ([94/62/EC](#)), as amended, the UK also had a statutory producer responsibility regime for packaging, covering the whole of the supply chain from the raw material to the finished packaging.

This Directive, as amended by the [Amending Packaging Waste Directive 2018](#) (Directive (EU) 2018/852) sets packaging waste recycling targets of 70% by

weight by 2030 with an interim target of 65% by 2025. It introduced a new plastic packaging recycling target of 55% to be reached by 2030.⁴²

The UK Government implemented the requirements of the Directive, by placing a legal obligation on businesses over a certain size which make or use packaging, to ensure that a proportion of the packaging they place on the market is recovered and recycled. This known as an extended producer responsibility scheme (EPR) for packaging. The primary legislation establishing it is the [Environment Act 1995](#) for England, Wales and Scotland and in Northern Ireland, the [Producer Responsibility \(Northern Ireland\) Order 1998](#). EPR has been in place since 1997 and operates UK-wide under the following regulations:

- The [Producer Responsibility Obligations \(Packaging Waste\) Regulations 2007](#) (no.871) (as amended) and the [Producer Responsibility Obligations \(Packaging Waste\) Regulations \(Northern Ireland\) 2007](#) (no.198) (and amendments) cover the recycling and recovery of packaging waste (the Packaging Waste Regulations).
- The [Packaging \(Essential Requirements\) \(Amendment\) Regulations 2015](#) (no.1640), cover single market and design and manufacturing aspects of packaging.

Relevant businesses discharge their responsibilities by collecting evidence of waste packaging recycling and recovery equivalent to the weight of their obligations from accredited reprocessors and exporters. Packaging Recovery Notes (PRNs) or Packaging Export Recovery Notes (PERNs) are issued by accredited businesses and provide the evidence for compliance.

More detailed information on the current rules on packaging producer responsibilities is provided on the GOV.UK website [Packaging waste: producer responsibilities](#).

Criticisms of the packaging producer responsibility scheme in relation to plastic

The National Audit Office (NAO) examined [The packaging recycling obligations in 2018](#). It expressed concern that there were no checks to ensure exported material actually was recycled and that there were risks of fraud and error within the system.⁴³

The Environmental Audit Committee examined the packaging producer responsibility scheme as part of its 2017 inquiry on [Plastic bottles: Turning Back the Plastic Tide](#). It noted that taxpayers, rather than producers, cover around 90% of the costs of packaging waste disposal, “indicating that the

⁴² European Commission press release, [Commission reviews implementation of EU waste rules, proposes actions to help 14 Member States meet recycling targets](#), 24 September 2018

⁴³ National Audit Office (NAO), [The packaging recycling obligations](#), 23 July 2018, p11

producer responsibility scheme is not working as it should.”⁴⁴ The committee recommended reform of the system to stimulate the use of recycled plastic and to reward design for recyclability. The committee also called for the Environment Agency (EA) to be given greater regulatory control and for waste processors to be held accountable to the EA for how they spend packaging revenue.⁴⁵

The packaging industry has also been critical of the scheme. For example, The [British Plastics Federation](#) (BPF) stated that the way the market for PRNs works has stagnated the UK plastics recycling industry and created a greater incentive for companies to seek PERNs and export plastic overseas for recycling where costs are cheaper.⁴⁶

In the 2018 [Resources and Waste Strategy for England](#), the government set out its own criticisms of the current system of extended producer responsibility for packaging, saying that lacked transparency and did not sufficiently incentivise design for greater reuse or recyclability.⁴⁷ To address this, the government set out a series of reforms for “immediate priority”.⁴⁸ To address the shortcomings identified, the strategy proposed a number of actions to improve the recyclability of packaging and to ensure that producers fund the management of packaging at the end of its life.⁴⁹

Reform of extended producer responsibility (EPR) system

Sections 50 and 51 of the [Environment Act 2021](#) contain measures to allow the UK Government and devolved administrations to amend extended producer responsibility scheme rules across the UK. It contains provision for those involved in the “manufacture, processing, distribution or supply of products or materials” to be required, by regulations, to pay for or contribute to the costs of disposing of those items.

A revised scheme is currently expected to be introduced from October 2025. The main change in the revised scheme will be that the full cost of collecting, sorting, recycling and disposing of household packaging waste will be placed on packaging producers rather than through local authorities. These businesses will need to meet recycling targets and label packaging to show its recyclability. From 2025, the fees will vary depending on the amount and

⁴⁴ House of Commons Environmental Audit Committee, [Plastic bottles: Turning Back the Plastic Tide](#), First Report of Session 2017–19, 22 December 2017, para 47

⁴⁵ House of Commons Environmental Audit Committee, [Plastic bottles: Turning Back the Plastic Tide](#), First Report of Session 2017–19, 22 December 2017, para 47-48

⁴⁶ British Plastics Federation Recycling Group, [Proposals for Growth of the UK Plastics Recycling Sector in a Circular Economy](#), March 2017

⁴⁷ HM Government, [Our waste, our resources: a strategy for England](#), Dec 2018, p34

⁴⁸ HM Government, [Our waste, our resources: a strategy for England](#), Dec 2018, p34

⁴⁹ HM Government, [Our waste, our resources: a strategy for England](#), Dec 2018, p35

type of packaging used, with lower fees for packaging that uses more easily recyclable material.⁵⁰

Producers will be required to pay an EPR fee to local authorities, via a Scheme Administrator, based on the amount of packaging they have supplied. The aim is to provide packaging producers with a “strong incentive” to consider the impacts that their products have once they have been discarded by consumers.⁵¹ The government has estimated that, “once EPR is fully operational this shift of cost from local authorities to producers is estimated to be around £1.2 billion per year across all local authorities.”⁵²

Reporting requirements already in place

New requirements for packaging producers to report on packaging data have already begun. Specifically, the [Packaging Waste \(Data Reporting\) \(England\) Regulations 2023](#) (SI 2023/219) require producers of packaging to collect and report data on the amount and type of packaging that they place on the market. This data is required to calculate the fees that these producers will be required to pay to cover the cost of managing this packaging as part of the revised EPR scheme.⁵³ The explanatory memorandum to the 2023 regulations set out the turnover threshold of when these requirements apply:

These new regulations will require producers with an annual turnover of £2 million, who handle more than 50 tonnes of packaging each year, to report data on the amount and type of packaging they supply. It will also increase the frequency of this reporting from once to twice per year. In addition, it will create a new ‘de minimis’ threshold, whereby producers with an annual turnover of £1 million, who handle more than 25 tonnes of packaging per year (but who do not surpass the “upper” threshold), will be required to collect (but not report) this data.

(...)

To minimise the impact of the requirements on small businesses (employing up to 50 people), the approach taken is to include a threshold within the regulations to exempt producers that do not handle more than 25 tonnes of packaging a year and have an annual turnover of more than £1 million. Producers that do not handle more than 50 tonnes of packaging a year and an annual turnover of more than £2 million will be exempt from the reporting obligations but will still need to collect and retain data.⁵⁴

An [impact assessment](#) (PDF) was published in March 2022 to accompany the proposals.

⁵⁰ National Audit Office, [The government’s resources and waste reforms for England](#), 30 June 2023

⁵¹ Environment Bill: Memorandum from the Department for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs to the Delegated Powers and Regulatory Reform Committee, 30 January 2020, para 57

⁵² HM Government, [Environmental Improvement Plan](#), 31 January 2023, p152

⁵³ [Explanatory memorandum](#) (opens PDF) to the Packaging Waste (Data Reporting) (England) Regulations 2023 (SI 2023/219), para 2.1

⁵⁴ [Explanatory memorandum](#) (opens PDF) to the Packaging Waste (Data Reporting) (England) Regulations 2023 (SI 2023/219), para 7.6 and 13.2

Delays to the new scheme

Further regulations will be needed before the revised scheme is fully implemented. In January 2023 the government had confirmed that EPR would be introduced on a phased basis from 2024, focusing on payments for household packaging waste in the first phase.⁵⁵ In July 2023 the government announced that implementation of the scheme would be delayed until October 2025.⁵⁶ The government said that this decision followed, “extensive engagement with industry, and in light of the pressure facing consumers and businesses in the current economic context.”⁵⁷

The government’s [press release announcing the delay](#) sets out support from some companies, such as Sainsbury’s, for the delay. Another article from the online waste publication, Circular, sets out some concerns about the delay in relation to investment in recycling infrastructure, [Defra confirms EPR delay until 2025 to help “drive down inflation”](#), 26 July 2023.

Consultations on EPR reform

The Environment Act provision for the revised EPR scheme followed several rounds of consultation on various aspects of the revised scheme.

February 2019 consultation

The government published a consultation, [Reforming the packaging producer responsibility system](#) on 18 February 2019, which sought views on reform. As the packaging waste producer responsibility scheme has been operated on a UK-wide basis to date, the consultation was undertaken jointly by the UK, Scottish and Welsh governments and the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs in Northern Ireland.⁵⁸

The response to this consultation was published in July 2019, [Reforming the UK packaging producer responsibility system: summary of responses and next steps](#). This document summarised the responses and key concerns. Overall, respondents were positive about the intent to improve the current system and for packaging EPR. A “large minority of respondents” stressed the need to ensure that the proposed policy interventions were joined-up and appropriate steps were taken to protect against unintended consequences. Stakeholders called for sufficient time before any changes happened to allow for investment in waste management and reprocessing infrastructure to occur.⁵⁹

⁵⁵ HM Government, [Environmental Improvement Plan](#), 31 January 2023, p152

⁵⁶ HM Government, [Update on packaging reforms to help drive down inflation](#), 25 July 2023

⁵⁷ HM Government, [Update on packaging reforms to help drive down inflation](#), 25 July 2023

⁵⁸ HM Government, [Consultation on reforming the UK packaging producer responsibility system](#), 18 February 2019, p7

⁵⁹ HM Government, [Reforming the UK packaging producer responsibility system: summary of responses and next steps](#), July 2019, p8

March 2021 consultation

In March 2021 the government published a further consultation on the [proposed changes to the extended producer responsibility for packaging system](#), alongside supporting documents and an impact assessment. It set out more detailed proposals aimed at incentivising producers to design packaging that is easy to recycle and ensuring that the producers pay the full net cost of managing this packaging once it becomes waste.

A [response to this consultation](#) (PDF) was published in March 2022. It confirmed that the government would implement EPR in a phased manner, focussing on payments for household packaging waste first.⁶⁰

March 2022 consultation

In March 2022 the government published a [Consultation on Reforms to the Packaging Waste Recycling Note \(PRN\) and Packaging Waste Export Recycling Note \(PERN\) System and Operator Approval](#). This consultation sought views on technical aspects such as reporting requirements on the sales of PRNs/PERNs.

The government published a [Summary of consultation responses and government response](#) in October 2022.⁶¹

July 2023 consultation

In July 2023 the government published a [Consultation on the draft Producer Responsibility Obligations \(Packaging and Packaging Waste\) Regulations 2024](#). These regulations would implement the measures agreed in the March 2022 consultation. This consultation closed on 9 October 2023 and a response has not yet been published.

Further information for businesses

The government has published some guidance documents intended to help businesses determine if the new rules are applicable to them. See:

- GOV.UK, [Extended producer responsibility for packaging: who is affected and what to do](#), updated 21 September 2023; and
- GOV.UK, [Packaging data: what to collect for extended producer responsibility](#), updated 21 September 2023

⁶⁰ HM Government, [Extended Producer Responsibility for Packaging Summary of consultation responses and Government response](#), 26 March 2022, p5-6 (opens PDF)

⁶¹ HM Government, [Reforms to the Packaging Waste Recycling Note \(PRN\) and Packaging Waste Export Recycling Note \(PERN\) Systems and Operator Approval Summary of consultation responses and government response](#), 28 October 2022

5.3

Plastic packaging tax

A new UK-wide plastic packaging tax took effect from 1 April 2022. It is designed to encourage the use of recycled rather than new plastic within plastic packaging.

Guidance documents on the new tax are available from the GOV.UK website, [Plastic Packaging Tax: steps to take](#), 2 January 2024.

Part 2 of the [Finance Act 2021](#) contained the measures to establish the plastic packaging tax and to make HMRC responsible for its administration. The tax was initially charged at a rate of £200 per tonne of plastic packaging from 1 April 2022, which increased to £210.82 per tonne from 1 April 2023. The government has said that it will legislate to increase the tax, in line with the consumer price index, from 1 April 2024, to £217.85 per tonne.⁶²

The tax applies to plastic packaging manufactured in, or imported into, the UK. There is an exemption for businesses who manufacture and/or import less than 10 tonnes of plastic packaging in a 12-month period.

The tax is not chargeable on plastic packaging which meets any of the following conditions:

- Has 30% or more recycled plastic content.
- Is made of multiple materials of which plastic is not proportionately the heaviest when measured by weight.
- Is manufactured or imported for use as immediate packaging of licensed human medicines.
- Is in use as transport packaging to import products into the UK.
- Is exported, filled or unfilled, unless it is in use as transport packaging to export products out of the UK.

For further information see GOV.UK, [Check which packaging is subject to Plastic Packaging Tax](#), 15 August 2023.

The [Plastic Packaging Tax \(Descriptions of Products\) Regulations 2021](#) (SI 2021/1417), exclude three types of packaging product from the scope of the tax:

- (i) packaging products that primarily provide a storage function, (for example, glasses cases, toolboxes, power tool cases, first aid kits, manicure set cases, earphone cases, video game cases, and board game boxes and inserts);
- (ii) packaging products that are an integral part of the good (for example, printer cartridges containing ink or toner, tea bags, mascara brushes, water filter cartridges, aerosol actuators, and inhalers); and

⁶² HM Treasury, [Autumn Statement 2023](#), 22 November 2023, para 5.156

- (iii) packaging products that are re-used in the presentation of goods (for example, re-usable sales display shelves and poster display stands).⁶³

The explanatory memorandum to the Regulations states that these products have been removed from the scope of the tax either because they do not typically contribute to plastic pollution, and/or, are an integral part of the product (without which the product cannot reasonably be used or consumed).⁶⁴

The plastics tax provisions follow several years of government consultations and announcements. Some of the key documents include:

- [Tackling the plastic problem: using the tax system or charges to address single-use plastic waste](#), March 2018 and a [summary of responses to the call for evidence](#), August 2018.
- The [Budget 2018](#), October 2018 and accompanying HM Treasury budget briefing on [Single Use Plastics](#).
- [Plastic packaging tax: consultation](#), February 2019 and [Plastic packaging tax: summary of responses to the consultation](#), July 2019.
- The [Budget 2020](#), March 2020. A further consultation was published alongside the Budget, [Plastic Packaging Tax: policy design consultation](#). The consultation sought views on the scope of the tax, liability for it, exclusions from it for small operators and registration, returns and enforcement. A [summary of responses to the consultation](#) was published in November 2020.⁶⁵
- Policy paper, [Introduction of a new plastic packaging tax](#), November 2020.
- Policy paper, [Introduction of Plastic Packaging Tax from April 2022](#), updated 20 July 2021
- Consultation on [Plastic Packaging Tax \(General\) Regulations 2021](#), November 2021. No government response to this consultation has been published.
- Consultation on [Plastic packaging tax - chemical recycling and adoption of a mass balance approach](#), 18 July 2023. The consultation closed on 10 October 2023. A government response has not yet been published.

5.4 Restrictions on single-use plastic items

Many parts of the UK have restricted, or propose to restrict, the supply and/or manufacture of certain single-use plastic items that are not packaging. The term “restriction” can encompass a ban on the supply (provision or sale)

⁶³ HM Government, [explanatory memorandum to the Plastic Packaging Tax \(Descriptions of Products\) Regulations 2021](#), undated

⁶⁴ HM Government, [explanatory memorandum to the Plastic Packaging Tax \(Descriptions of Products\) Regulations 2021](#), undated

⁶⁵ HM Revenue & Customs, [Plastic Packaging Tax: Summary of Responses to the Policy Design Consultation](#), November 2020

and/or a ban on manufacturing. These restrictions are often accompanied by specified exemptions, for example, to cater for medical needs.

Table 1 and the following sections below set out which items have been restricted in each part of the UK. Section 7.3 of this briefing provides information about further items proposed for restriction.

Table 1: Restrictions on single-use plastic items in the UK				
Item	England	Scotland	Wales	Northern Ireland
Microbeads in rinse-off personal care products	Ban on manufacture and supply 2018	Ban on manufacture and supply 2018	Ban on manufacture and supply 2018	Ban on manufacture and supply 2019
Single-use plastic plates	Ban on supply Oct 2023	Ban on manufacture and supply June 2022	Ban on supply Oct 2023	No ban*
Single-use plastic cutlery	Ban on supply Oct 2023	Ban on manufacture and supply June 2022	Ban on supply Oct 2023	No ban*
Single-use plastic drinks stirrers	Ban on supply Oct 2020	Ban on manufacture and supply June 2022	Ban on supply Oct 2023	No ban*
Cups made of expanded or foamed extruded polystyrene	Ban on supply Oct 2023	Ban on manufacture and supply June 2022	Ban on supply Oct 2023	No ban*
Takeaway food containers made of expanded or foamed extruded polystyrene	Ban on supply Oct 2023	Ban on manufacture and supply June 2022	Ban on supply Oct 2023	No ban*
Single-use plastic balloon sticks	Ban on supply Oct 2023	Ban on supply June 2022	Ban on supply Oct 2023	No ban*
Single-use plastic-stemmed Cotton buds	Ban on supply Oct 2020	Ban on manufacture and supply Oct 2019	Ban on supply Oct 2023	No ban*
Single-use plastic drinking straws	Ban on supply Oct 2020	Ban on supply June 2022	Ban on supply Oct 2023	No ban*
Carrier bags – with exemptions	10p charge , no proposals to ban	10p charge , no proposals to ban	5p charge. Ban on supply proposed from “spring” 2026	25p charge , no proposals to ban

Polystyrene lids for cups	No ban/proposals	Ban on manufacture and supply June 2022	Ban on supply proposed from "spring" 2026	No ban*
Oxo-degradable plastic products	Possible ban , subject to further consultation	Scottish Govt seeking further info before making decision	Ban on supply proposed from "spring" 2026	No ban
Wet wipes containing plastic	Proposed ban on manufacture and sale . No date	Proposed ban on manufacture and sale . No date	Proposed ban on manufacture and sale . No date	Proposed ban on manufacture and sale . No date

Source: See hyperlinks to legislation and consultations in the table

* for information about the situation in Northern Ireland see the section on Northern Ireland below

Internal Market Act considerations

The [United Kingdom Internal Market \(UKIM\) Act 2020](#) established a principle of mutual recognition for goods. This means goods that have been produced or imported into one part of the UK, and which can be sold or supplied there without contravening any restrictions, can be sold in any other part of the UK, free from any restrictions which would otherwise apply. Any regulations banning the supply of single use plastic items would be subject to this principle.

The 2020 UK Government policy paper, [Goods market access: approach to restrictions and bans](#) set out how any single use plastic ban would operate across the UK:

Devolved administrations could introduce a ban on the sale of a particular good, but the ban would only cover local products produced in that part of the UK (or those imported into that territory from outside the UK). Devolved administrations could not enforce that ban against sellers of goods produced in, or imported into, other parts of the UK.⁶⁶

There is an exemption from the requirements of the UKIM Act, in England, (through [The United Kingdom Internal Market Act 2020 \(Exclusions from Market Access Principles: Single-Use Plastics\) Regulations 2022](#) (S.I. 2022/857)) for plastic plates, cutlery, balloon sticks, and expanded and extruded polystyrene food and drink containers, including cups. This means, that these items cannot be sold in England, regardless of whether or not they are permitted for sale in other parts of the UK. The UK Government explains that the introduction of this exclusion recognised that there was a “shared ambition across the UK to tackle plastic pollution and that legislation

⁶⁶ UK Government policy paper, [Goods market access: approach to restrictions and bans](#), 20 November 2020

banning the sale of the single-use plastic items covered by this exclusion will be introduced in England, Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland.”⁶⁷

The exemption does not cover single-use plastic bowls and trays. The explanatory memorandum stated, therefore, that “Single-use plastic bowls and trays legally produced in or imported into other parts of the United Kingdom (i.e., Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland) which meet any relevant requirements for sale there will still be able to be sold in England, notwithstanding the provisions of this instrument, as a result of the mutual recognition principle in the UKIM Act.”⁶⁸

UK Government: ban on single use items (England)

In England the UK Government has made regulations to ban the sale and supply of specified plastic items. These regulations have all been made under powers stemming from section 140 of the [Environmental Protection Act 1990](#) and section 62(2) of the [Regulatory Enforcement and Sanctions Act 2008](#).

Plastic drink stirrers, plastic straws and plastic stemmed cotton buds

From October 2020 the sale of plastic straws, drink stirrers and plastic-stemmed cotton buds in England have been banned, subject to certain exemptions, through [The Environmental Protection \(Plastic Straws, Cotton Buds and Stirrers\) \(England\) Regulations 2020](#) (SI 2020/971). The rules are enforced by local authorities (and their trading standards officers).⁶⁹ There is accompanying government guidance on the rules, [Straws, cotton buds and drink stirrers ban: rules for businesses in England](#), 21 September 2020.

The ban on these products followed a consultation process which began in October 2018, [Consultation on proposals to ban the distribution and/or sale of plastic straws, plastic - stemmed cotton buds and plastic drink stirrers in England](#). It was accompanied by an impact assessment for each product (accessed from the main consultation page).

Disposable plastic plates, cutlery, polystyrene containers and balloon sticks

From 1 October 2023 the sale and supply of single-use plastic cutlery, plates, bowls, trays, balloon sticks and polystyrene containers and cups have been prohibited, subject to certain exemptions, through [The Environmental Protection \(Plastic Plates etc. and Polystyrene Containers etc.\) \(England\) Regulations 2023](#) (SI 2023/982). For further information see GOV.UK, [Single-](#)

⁶⁷ HM Government, [Explanatory memorandum \(PDF\) to the United Kingdom Internal Market Act 2020 \(Exclusions from Market Access Principles: Single-Use Plastics\) Regulations 2022](#), para 7.10

⁶⁸ HM Government, [Explanatory memorandum \(PDF\) to The Environmental Protection \(Plastic Plates etc. and Polystyrene Containers etc.\) \(England\) Regulations 2023](#), para 6.5

⁶⁹ HM Government, [Explanatory Memorandum](#) to the Environmental Protection (Plastic Straws, Cotton Buds and Stirrers) (England) Regulations 2020, para 11.1

[use plastics ban: plates, bowls, trays, containers, cutlery and balloon sticks](#), 23 May 2023.

The ban on these items follows a consultation process, [Consultation on proposals to ban commonly littered single-use plastic items in England](#), November 2021. It was accompanied by an impact assessment for each product (accessed from the main consultation page). A [Summary of responses and government response](#) was published, updated 14 January 2023.

Welsh Government: ban on single use items

In Wales the [Environmental Protection \(Single-use Plastic Products\) \(Wales\) Act 2023](#) makes it a criminal offence to supply or offer to supply (including for free) certain single-use plastic products to consumers in Wales, unless an exemption applies. This legislation followed on from a December 2019 consultation, [Beyond Recycling: A strategy to make the circular economy in Wales a reality](#).⁷⁰ In the final version of the strategy published in March 2021, the Welsh Government said that it would, “Restrict the sale of the most commonly littered single-use plastic items on our way to phasing out unnecessary items completely.”⁷¹

The provisions of the Act are coming into force in a phased manner. Phase 1 began on 30 October 2023 and includes:

- Single-use plastic plates – this includes paper plates with a laminated plastic surface
- Single-use plastic cutlery – for example forks, spoons, knives
- Single-use plastic drinks stirrers
- Cups made of expanded or foamed extruded polystyrene.
- Takeaway food containers made of expanded or foamed extruded polystyrene
- Single-use plastic balloon sticks
- Single-use plastic-stemmed Cotton buds
- Single-use plastic drinking straws – with exemptions so people who need them to eat and drink safely and independently can continue to have them.⁷²

⁷⁰ Welsh Government, [Beyond Recycling: A strategy to make the circular economy in Wales a reality](#), 19 December 2019

⁷¹ Welsh Government, [Beyond Recycling: A strategy to make the circular economy in Wales a reality](#), March 2021, p18

⁷² Welsh Government, [The Environmental Protection \(Single-use Plastic Products\) \(Wales\) Act 2023 guidance](#), 1 November 2023

Further information can be found in Welsh Government guidance, [The Environmental Protection \(Single-use Plastic Products\) \(Wales\) Act 2023 guidance](#), 1 November 2023.

The Welsh Government aims to introduce phase 2 by “Spring 2026” and this will include:

- Carrier bags – with exemptions including carrier bags for raw fish, meat or poultry and unpackaged food
- Polystyrene lids for cups and takeaway food containers
- Oxo-degradable plastic products.⁷³

Scottish Government: ban on single use items

The Scottish Government has made regulations to ban the sale and supply of specified plastic items. These regulations have all been made under powers stemming from section 140 of the [Environmental Protection Act 1990](#).

These restrictions followed on from proposals in the consultation document, [Developing Scotland's circular economy: consultation on proposals for legislation](#), November 2019, which proposed a legislative approach towards a ban on specified single-use plastic items.⁷⁴ Detailed proposals were then set out in a later consultation, [Consultation: Introducing market restrictions on single-use plastic items in Scotland](#), October 2020.

Cotton buds

The [Environmental Protection \(Cotton Buds\) \(Scotland\) Regulations 2019](#) (SI 2019/271) introduced a ban on the manufacture, sale and supply of plastic stemmed cotton buds and came into force on 12 October 2019.

The legislation followed a consultation on [a proposal to ban the manufacture and sale of plastic-stemmed cotton buds in Scotland](#), April 2018. The [Consultation Response](#) was published on 30 July 2018.⁷⁵

Further single use plastic items

The [Environmental Protection \(Single-use Plastic Products\) \(Scotland\) Regulations 2021](#)(SI 2021/410) came into force on 1 June 2022. These regulations:

make it an offence to supply, in the course of business, and to manufacture:

- single-use expanded polystyrene beverage cups

⁷³ Welsh Government, [The Environmental Protection \(Single-use Plastic Products\) \(Wales\) Act 2023 guidance](#), 1 November 2023

⁷⁴ Scottish Government, [Developing Scotland's circular economy: consultation on proposals for legislation](#), 7 November 2019, p14

⁷⁵ Scottish Government, [Plastic Cotton Bud Submission: Consultation Response Report](#), July 2018, p3

- single-use expanded polystyrene beverage containers
- single-use expanded polystyrene food containers
- single-use plastic cutlery
- single-use plastic plates
- single-use plastic beverage stirrers.

The Regulations make it an offence to supply, in the course of a business and subject to specified exemptions of:

- single-use plastic straws
- single-use plastic balloon sticks.⁷⁶

Further information about the restrictions is available from the Zero Waste Scotland website, [FAQs - Single-use plastics – regulations](#), 21 March 2023.

Northern Ireland

From 3 July 2021 the [EU has put in place legislative restrictions on specified single use plastic items](#) in its member states. These items are:

- Cotton bud sticks,
- Cutlery (forks, knives, spoons, chopsticks)
- Plates
- Straws,
- Beverage stirrers
- Balloon sticks
- Food containers made of expanded polystyrene
- Beverage containers made of expanded polystyrene, including their caps and lids
- Cups for beverages made of expanded polystyrene, including their covers and lids⁷⁷

The [EU's restrictions on single use plastic items](#) were added to the (amended) [Northern Ireland Protocol to the UK/EU Withdrawal Agreement](#). This means that these EU restrictions apply in the UK in respect of Northern

⁷⁶ Scottish Government [policy note on the Environmental Protection \(Single-use Plastic Products\) \(Scotland\) Regulations 2021](#), November 2021, p1

⁷⁷ [Directive \(EU\) 2019/904 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 5 June 2019 on the reduction of the impact of certain plastic products on the environment](#), Annex part B

Ireland. Northern Ireland was given an extended transition date to implement these provisions by 1 January 2022, which has not been met.⁷⁸ In 2022 the Northern Ireland Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs argued that [implementing these restrictions is an obligation for the UK Government to deliver](#).⁷⁹

At the time of writing, neither the UK Government nor the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs in Northern Ireland have put forward proposals to follow the EU's provisions in respect of Northern Ireland.

For further information about the Northern Ireland Protocol, amendments, grace periods and dispute mechanisms, see the Commons Library hub on the [Northern Ireland Protocol](#).

5.5 Single use carrier bags charge

All parts of the UK have introduced a charge for plastic, single-use carrier bags. The purpose of the charge is to reduce the number of bags given out, increase their re-use and reduce litter. The [Climate Change Act 2008](#) and the [Climate Change \(Scotland\) Act 2009](#) provided the legislative framework for the single use carrier bag charge.

Wales (from 2011), Northern Ireland (from 2013) and Scotland (from 2014) introduced a 5 pence levy on single use carrier bags. In Scotland the charge was raised to 10 pence from 1 April 2021⁸⁰ and in Northern Ireland it was raised to 25 pence from 1 April 2022.⁸¹

In England the charge (originally set at 5 pence), on single use carrier bags came into effect on 5 October 2015. From 21 May 2021 the charge was increased to its current level of 10 pence.⁸²

For further information about the charges across the UK see Library briefing paper, [Plastic bags – the single use carrier bag charge \(October 2020\)](#).

⁷⁸ Cabinet Office, [Explanatory Memorandum, 13914/20, UK 114](#): COUNCIL DECISION on the position to be taken on behalf of the European Union within the Joint Committee established by the Agreement on the withdrawal of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland from the European Union and the European Atomic Energy Community as regards the adoption of a decision to amend the Protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland, submitted 8 December 2020

⁷⁹ Northern Ireland Assembly written question [AQW 28142/17-22j](#), answered 31 January 2022

⁸⁰ [The Single Use Carrier Bags Charge \(Scotland\) Amendment Regulations 2021](#) (SI no.134)

⁸¹ [Single Use Carrier Bags Charge \(Amendment\) Regulations \(Northern Ireland\) 2021](#) (SI 2021/338)

⁸² By the [Single Use Carrier Bags Charges \(England\) \(Amendment\) Order 2021](#) (SI 2021/598)

6 Overarching government plans and strategies

In the UK, responsibility for waste and resources is devolved. Each part of the UK has its own policies, plans and strategies for waste related issues. The key documents in relation to plastic waste are set out below.

Following EU exit, the four parts of the UK are no longer bound together by the overarching rules on waste as provided by the EU. As a result, the UK and devolved governments have agreed a series of common frameworks. These aim to avoid significant policy divergence between the nations of the UK where that would be undesirable. A [Resources and waste: provisional common framework](#) was published on 19 December 2022. It sets out how the UK and devolved governments will work together on resources and waste policy areas.

6.1 UK Government

The UK Government has published a several documents, targets and commitments that are relevant to plastic waste in England:

- [Resources and waste strategy for England](#), December 2018. This Strategy sets out the government’s ambition to move towards a more circular economy, to “become a world leader in using resources efficiently and reducing the amount of waste we create as a society.” It also set the “strategic ambition” to “...work towards all plastic packaging placed on the market being recyclable, reusable or compostable by 2025.” This is also accompanied by a series of [monitoring and evaluation](#) reports.
- [Waste Management Plan for England 2021](#), January 2021. This document provides information of how waste (including plastic waste) arises and is managed in the context of government policies and commitments.
- [Environmental Improvement Plan 2023](#) (EIP), 31 January 2023. This document updates government policy on the environment in England since the publication of the January 2018 [25 Year Environment Plan](#), which had set an ambition of “eliminating avoidable plastic waste by end of 2042”. Avoidable is defined as “what is technically, environmentally and economically practicable.”

The EIP provides further information about long-term and interim targets in policy areas, including on plastic waste and resources. In particular, it

sets an interim target to ensure that residual municipal plastic waste in the most recent full calendar year does not exceed 42 kg per capita, by 31 January 2028. This is equivalent to a 45% reduction from 2019 levels. This goal is one of eight interim targets set to support the long-term goal that by 31 December 2042, the total mass of residual waste excluding major mineral wastes in a calendar year does not exceed 287 kg per capita. Residual waste is waste that is sent to landfill, put through incineration or used in energy recovery in the UK or overseas.

The 25-year plan is accompanied by an [Outcome Indicator Framework](#). This aims to show how the environment is changing in relation to the 10 goals of the 25 Year Environment Plan. Further information about the indicators and progress on them is provided by the government in a series of [25 Year Environment Plan: progress reports](#).

- [Waste prevention programme for England: Maximising Resources, Minimising Waste](#), 28 July 2023. This sets out the government’s priorities for managing resources and waste in relation to seven different sectors, including plastic. It sets an aim to “encourage a shift away from hard to recycle and single-use products and packaging, and support research and innovation into more sustainable alternatives and systems, reducing litter and plastic pollution as well as conserving material resources.”

It is accompanied by a [Maximising Resources, Minimising Waste: policy summary table](#), which summarises all of the government’s proposed actions in these areas, along with target dates.

6.2 Welsh Government

The Welsh Government has strategies relating to waste in general and about moving to a more circular economy.

- [Towards Zero Waste](#) (TZW), June 2010, is the overarching waste strategy document for Wales. It is supported by a suite of sector plans and other documents, which together with TZW, comprise the statutory waste management plan for Wales. Accompanying documents can be found on the [Welsh Government website](#). The Welsh Government has an ambition to become a “zero waste nation by 2050”. TZW is also accompanied by a [Waste sector plan and waste prevention programme: summary report](#), which set out progress on the actions and commitments of the waste management plan to March 2016.
- [Beyond Recycling: A strategy to make the circular economy in Wales a reality](#), March 2021. This sets out how the Welsh Government intends to move towards a more circular economy, including an ambition to “strive to achieve the highest rates of recycling in the world.” The strategy contains eight “ambitious headline actions”, one of which relates explicitly to plastics:

3. We will phase out unnecessary single-use items, especially plastic. We will send zero plastic to landfill and progressively reduce the amount sent to energy recovery. We will achieve this with game-changing reforms such as an Extended Producer Responsibility Scheme for packaging, a Deposit Return Scheme for drinks containers and by applying bans or restrictions on unnecessary single-use items.⁸³

6.3 Scottish Government

The Scottish Government has a several plans, policies and a route map relevant to the management of plastic waste.

- The [Zero Waste Plan](#), June 2010, set a vision for a zero-waste society. The plan set ambition for a 70% recycling target for all waste (regardless of its source) by 2025.
- The [Circular Economy \(Scotland\) Bill](#) was published in June 2023. It would, among other things, give ministers powers to set local recycling targets and set charges on single-use items, such as coffee cups. Publication of the bill followed consultation. See [Developing Scotland's circular economy: consultation on proposals for legislation](#), November 2019, [Developing Scotland's circular economy - proposals for legislation: analysis of responses](#), 29 May 2020 and [Delivering Scotland's circular economy - proposed Circular Economy Bill: consultation](#), 30 May 2022.
- [Delivering Scotland's circular economy - route map to 2025 and beyond: consultation](#), May 2022. This was the first consultation on circular economy proposals and on actions to reach Scotland's waste, recycling, and emissions reduction targets. The [results of the consultation](#) were published in July 2023.
- [Circular economy and waste route map to 2030: consultation](#), January 2024. This is the second consultation on actions to be taken until 2030 to build a circular economy in Scotland. It sets out plans to end the “unnecessary” incineration of plastics. The consultation ended on 15 March 2024.
- The [Managing Waste Policy](#) webpage provides an overview of actions to reduce waste and improve resource efficiency. It summarises the Scottish Government waste and recycling targets:

We have several ambitious targets for reducing waste and increasing recycling. By 2025, we aim to:

- reduce total waste arising in Scotland by 15% against 2011 levels

⁸³ Welsh Government, [Beyond Recycling: A strategy to make the circular economy in Wales a reality](#), March 2021, p6

- reduce food waste by 33% against 2013 levels
- recycle 70% of remaining waste
- send no more than 5% of remaining waste to landfill

6.4 Northern Ireland

There are several plans and strategies in Northern Ireland relevant to plastic waste.

- The [Delivering Resource Efficiency - Northern Ireland Waste Management Strategy](#), 2013, includes sections on resource re-use and recycling. DAERA published [The Waste Prevention Programme for Northern Ireland – The Road to Zero Waste](#), in September 2014, which set out a renewed focus on waste prevention, preparing for re-use and recycling in accordance with the waste hierarchy. These documents have now been officially “closed” by DAERA and an analysis of the delivery of the actions and targets was published in June 2022, [Closure Report Northern Ireland Waste Management Strategy 2013](#).
- In October 2019 DAERA consulted on and published a [Waste Management Plan for Northern Ireland](#). This document sets out Northern Ireland’s intentions to work towards a sustainable and circular economy. This replaces the 2013 document above.
- In June 2021 the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA) published a [Call for Evidence](#) to help inform the development of a plan to eliminate plastic pollution in Northern Ireland. The call for evidence has now closed and a response has not been published.
- In January 2022 the Department for the Economy published a [public consultation on the draft Circular Economy Strategy for Northern Ireland](#). In its vision for a more circular economy, single use plastic use would be reduced. The response to this, [Draft Circular Economy Strategy for Northern Ireland – Public Consultation Response Report](#), was published on 16 August 2023.

7 Next steps: government proposals on plastic waste

The sections below set out specific commitments, proposals and policies in relation to dealing with plastic waste.

Policies relating specifically to marine plastic waste are set out separately in section 10.

7.1 Packaging producer responsibility reform

As set out in section 4.2 (above), the UK Government has committed to reforming the extended producer responsibility system for packaging. The intention is for a UK-wide reform of the system. Legislative provisions which will allow the government to take forward the reforms are contained in the [Environment Act 2021](#). It is currently expected that a revised scheme will be introduced from October 2025.⁸⁴

7.2 Disposable cups

In January 2018 the Environmental Audit Committee highlighted the difficulties in recycling disposable cups; they are made from paper and lined with plastic, which makes them waterproof and this plastic lining cannot be removed by most recycling facilities.⁸⁵

Several policy options have been put forward across the UK to deal with the challenge that single use disposal cups can be difficult to recycle.

UK-wide mandatory takeback scheme

In the UK-wide [Extended Producer Responsibility for Packaging Consultation Document](#), (24 March 2021) there was a consultation on whether there should be a mandatory takeback scheme for filled-fibre based composite cups (often referred to as disposable or single-use cups). A [response to this consultation](#) in March 2022 (PDF) confirmed such a scheme will be introduced.

⁸⁴ National Audit Office, [The government's resources and waste reforms for England](#), 30 June 2023

⁸⁵ House of Commons Environmental Audit Committee, [Disposable Packaging: Coffee Cups. Second Report of Session 2017-19](#), 5 January 2018, para 68

The takeback requirement would apply to sellers of filled fibre-based composite cups that employ 10 or more full-time equivalent staff members and who will be required to provide a dedicated bin for the separate collection of cups. These sellers will also be required to report to a regulator (to be confirmed in the future regulations) the tonnage they have placed on the market and the tonnage they have collected and sent for recycling. The government estimates that this will cover three quarters of filled fibre-based composite cups that are sold. The government has said that it will review progress of the requirement and consider whether the obligation should be extended to all sellers of filled fibre-based composite cups.⁸⁶

The requirement for a takeback bin was expected to begin in 2024, to align with the wider EPR reforms (see section 5.2), but it is not now clear whether this will be delayed until October 2025, along with the wider EPR reforms.⁸⁷

UK Government: call for evidence on a charge and exploration of further options

In November 2021 the UK Government published a consultation seeking views about what to do with specific plastic items in England: [Call for evidence on commonly littered and problematic plastic items](#), which included single-use plastic cups. It asked whether there would be any support for consultation on a proposal to introduce a charge for single-use cups.

A [Summary of responses and government response was published](#), updated 14 January 2023. In the response the government said, “consulting on introducing a charge on all single-use cups in all business sizes would generally be supported. Defra will consider next steps.”

In the January 2023 Environmental Improvement Plan the government said that it would, “Explore options further, including with stakeholders, for the potential for technological innovation in the production of coffee cups, and behavioural science in how they are used.”⁸⁸

Welsh Government: disposable cups charge

The Welsh Government website states that “We are exploring a Welsh tax on disposable single use cups to reduce their use, encourage re-use, and reduce the litter they can create.”⁸⁹

The Welsh Government’s March 2021 strategy, *Beyond Recycling*, states that it will:

⁸⁶ HM Government, [Extended Producer Responsibility for Packaging Summary of consultation responses and Government response](#), (PDF) 26 March 2022, p25-26

⁸⁷ HM Government, [Extended Producer Responsibility for Packaging Summary of consultation responses and Government response](#) (PDF), 26 March 2022, p26

⁸⁸ HM Government, [Environmental Improvement Plan](#), January 2023, p154

⁸⁹ Welsh Government website, [Developing new Welsh taxes](#), 28 June 2018 update version

- Develop options for a tax or charge on disposable plastic cups and food containers in Wales.
- Take action to remove unnecessary single-use items from events and other showcase activities in Wales. In the first instance, we will do so by engaging on banning single-use disposable cups from many stadia in Wales.⁹⁰

Scottish Government: disposable cups charge

In its November 2019 consultation document, [Developing Scotland's circular economy: consultation on proposals for legislation](#), the Scottish Government said it would use legislate to implement a charge on single-use disposable beverage cups.⁹¹

Section 9 of the [Circular Economy \(Scotland\) Bill](#), as introduced on 13 June 2023, would give the Scottish Ministers a power to introduce a charge for the supply of a single-use item.

Minutes from the Scottish Government's Single-Use Disposable Cups Charge Advisory Group, June 2023, indicate the intention to publish further consultation and impact assessment before any charge is introduced, and that the aim is to introduce a charge from 2025. The minutes also noted that there has been engagement with the UK Government on whether there will be any UK internal market implications for the charge.⁹²

Northern Ireland: disposable cups charge

In October 2021 the Department for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA) published a [Consultation on proposals for the reduction of the usage of Single-use Plastic \(SUP\) beverage cups and food containers in Northern Ireland](#). The consultation sought views on three different options relating to both SUP beverage cups and food containers:

- A ban on their use;
- A levy of 25p on each cup and 50p on each food container; and
- A voluntary scheme or schemes implemented by businesses that make use of SUP cups or food containers, which may comprise a range of charges for cups/food containers, discounts for MU cups/food containers

⁹⁰ Welsh Government, [Beyond Recycling: a strategy to make the circular economy in Wales a reality](#), March 2021, p33

⁹¹ Scottish Government, [Developing Scotland's circular economy: consultation on proposals for legislation](#), 7 November 2019, p16-17

⁹² Scottish Government, [Single-Use Disposable Cups Charge Advisory Group minutes: June 2023](#)

and communication efforts. This is modelled as having the same effect as a 10p levy for a beverage cup and 25p for a food container.⁹³

DAERA has not said which, if any, of these options it would take forward.

7.3 Proposals for restrictions on single-use plastic items

In addition to the single-use plastic items that have already been restricted across the UK (as set out in section 5.4 of this briefing), there are proposals to restrict other items.

Single-use vapes

In a consultation published on 12 October 2023, [Creating a smokefree generation and tackling youth vaping](#), the UK Government consulted on whether there should be restrictions on the sale and supply of disposable (single-use) vapes.

The consultation states that the UK Government, Scotland and Wales are considering restrictions on the sale and supply of disposable vaping products (including non-nicotine vapes), due to the environmental impacts of disposable vapes. Northern Ireland will apparently consider measures relating to disposable vapes following this consultation.⁹⁴

On 11 March 2024 the government published [The Draft Environmental Protection \(Single-use Vapes\) \(England\) Regulations 2024](#) for consultation. It has invited views on this draft regulation until 25 March 2024. It is not known when the regulations will come into force.

For further information on the environmental impact of single-use vapes see the Library [briefing Environmental impact of disposable vapes](#) (November 2022) and for further information about vaping and regulation more generally see the [tobacco and vaping hub on the Commons Library website](#).

Wet wipes containing plastic

A UK-wide consultation was published on 14 October 2023, [Consultation on the proposed ban of the manufacture supply and sale of wet wipes containing plastic](#). The proposed ban will relate to the manufacture, supply and sale of wet wipes containing plastic, with potential exemptions, across the UK. The possible exemptions being consulted on are wet wipes intended for medical

⁹³ Department for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs [Consultation on proposals for the reduction of the usage of Single-use Plastic \(SUP\) beverage cups and food containers in Northern Ireland](#), October 2021, p8

⁹⁴ HM Government, [Creating a smokefree generation and tackling youth vaping: your views](#), October 2023

and clinical use, and wet wipes for specified industrial, professional and commercial settings (for example, wipes used for dealing with hazardous substances). The consultation closed on 25 November 2023 and a government response has not yet been published.

UK Government: tobacco filters and sachets

In November 2021 the UK Government published a consultation seeking views about what to do with specific plastic items in England: [Call for evidence on commonly littered and problematic plastic items](#). This covered wet wipes, tobacco filters, sachets (which includes sachets used for food and drink, for example milk, salad dressing used in on-the-go salads, condiments and those used for cosmetics and healthcare), and other single-use plastic cups.

A [Summary of responses and government response was published](#), updated 14 January 2023 where the government indicated that further work and analysis would be required before taking next steps on these measures. As set out above, further work has now been published in relation to disposable cups and wet wipes.

Welsh Government: carrier bags, polystyrene lids and oxo-degradable plastic products

As set out in section 5.4 of this briefing, in Wales phase 1 of the implementation of the [Environmental Protection \(Single-use Plastic Products\) \(Wales\) Act 2023](#) has already made it a criminal offence to supply or offer to supply (including for free) certain single-use plastic products to consumers. The Welsh Government aims to introduce phase 2 by “Spring 2026” and this will include:

- Carrier bags – with exemptions including carrier bags for raw fish, meat or poultry and unpackaged food
- Polystyrene lids for cups and takeaway food containers
- Oxo-degradable plastic products.⁹⁵

This legislation followed on from a December 2019 consultation, [Beyond Recycling: A strategy to make the circular economy in Wales a reality](#).⁹⁶ In the final version of the strategy published in March 2021, the Welsh Government said that it would, “Restrict the sale of the most commonly littered single-use plastic items on our way to phasing out unnecessary items completely.”⁹⁷

⁹⁵ Welsh Government, [The Environmental Protection \(Single-use Plastic Products\) \(Wales\) Act 2023 guidance](#), 1 November 2023

⁹⁶ Welsh Government, [Beyond Recycling: A strategy to make the circular economy in Wales a reality](#), 19 December 2019

⁹⁷ Welsh Government, [Beyond Recycling: A strategy to make the circular economy in Wales a reality](#), March 2021, p18

A further consultation, [Reducing single use plastic in Wales](#) was published in July 2020. The consultation also set out that the impact of including wet wipes and disposable cleaning cloths in future interventions would be considered in forthcoming evidence gathering work.⁹⁸ A Welsh Government [summary of responses to the consultation](#) (PDF), was published in August 2022.

As noted above, the Welsh Government is included in the October 2023 UK-wide [Consultation on the proposed ban of the manufacture supply and sale of wet wipes containing plastic](#). No further work has been published on restrictions on cleaning cloths.

Scottish Government: plastic tampon applicators

In an October 2020 [consultation on Introducing market restrictions on single-use plastic items in Scotland](#), Marine Scotland (part of the Scottish Government responsible for marine and freshwater environments), had identified plastic wet wipes and plastic tampon applicators as being “particularly problematic”, and said that it was the Scottish Government’s intention to explore further market restrictions on this wider range of items “in due course.”⁹⁹ An analysis of consultation responses, [Market restrictions on single-use plastic items: consultation analysis](#), was published on 17 March 2021, highlighting that there had been “strong support” for market restrictions.¹⁰⁰

As noted above, the Scottish Government is included in the October 2023 UK-wide [Consultation on the proposed ban of the manufacture supply and sale of wet wipes containing plastic](#). No further work has been published in respect of restrictions on plastic tampons.

Northern Ireland: ban on single use items

As set out in section 5.4 of this briefing, [EU restrictions](#) on single-use plastic which would apply in Northern Ireland by virtue of the (amended) [Northern Ireland Protocol to the UK/EU Withdrawal Agreement](#) have not yet been implemented.

In October 2021 the Department for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA) published a [Consultation on proposals for the reduction of the usage of Single-use Plastic beverage cups and food containers in Northern Ireland](#).¹⁰¹ The document consults on three policy options for what could happen for both single use beverage cups and food containers:

⁹⁸ Welsh Government, [Reducing single use plastic in Wales](#) July 2020, para 35-36

⁹⁹ Scottish Government, [Consultation: Introducing market restrictions on single-use plastic items in Scotland](#), October 2020, p8

¹⁰⁰ Scottish Government, [Market restrictions on single-use plastic items: consultation analysis](#), 17 March 2021, para 5

¹⁰¹ Northern Ireland Department for Agriculture, [Environment and Rural Affairs, Consultation for the Reduction of Single-Use Plastic Beverage Cups and Food Containers](#), October 2021

- A ban on their use;
- A levy of 25p on each cup and 50p on each food container; and
- A voluntary scheme or schemes implemented by businesses that make use of SUP cups or food containers, which may comprise a range of charges for cups/food containers, discounts for MU [multi-use] cups/food containers and communication efforts. This is modelled as having the same effect as a 10p levy for a beverage cup and 25p for a food container.¹⁰²

DAERA has not yet responded to the consultation.

7.4 Deposit return scheme for drinks containers

Box 3: What is a deposit return scheme?

In a deposit return scheme, consumers are charged a sum of money as a deposit up-front when they buy a single-use container (normally for drinks products). This can be redeemed when the empty container is returned. In existing schemes in other countries consumers can either return containers through a reverse vending machine or manually to a retailer to redeem the deposit value.¹⁰³

The aim is to increase the recycling of commonly littered items.

While all parts of the UK intend to introduce a DRS, the Scottish Government has planned to introduce its own DRS separate to the rest of the UK. Regulations have been made, but the start date has been delayed several times. In June 2023 the Scottish Government said that its scheme will be delayed until at least October 2025, “as a consequence of the UK Government’s refusal to agree a full exclusion from the Internal Market Act.”¹⁰⁴

The UK Government, Wales and Northern Ireland have stated their intention to introduce a deposit return scheme, which is expected to commence in October 2025.¹⁰⁵ There has been speculation by the drinks container industry, however, that the start date may be further delayed.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰² Northern Ireland Department for Agriculture, [Environment and Rural Affairs, Consultation for the Reduction of Single-Use Plastic Beverage Cups and Food Containers](#), October 2021, p8

¹⁰³ HM Government, [Our waste, our resources: a strategy for England](#), Dec 2018, p61

¹⁰⁴ Scottish Government, [Deposit Return](#), 7 June 2023

¹⁰⁵ HM Government, [Environmental Improvement Plan](#), January 2023, p12

¹⁰⁶ The Grocer, [Deposit return scheme set for delay to 2026 ‘at earliest’](#), 30 August 2023 and The Grocer, [DRS delays drag on, but what’s stopping progress?](#) 15 February 2024

There has been some dispute about whether DRS schemes should include glass. [The glass industry has argued against including it](#), saying that it would increase cost and complexity by including a heavier material that breaks easily and can be difficult to transport and store safely.¹⁰⁷ However, [environmental groups such as Plastic Planet and City to Sea have favoured including glass](#), arguing that it would reduce the environmental impact of glass litter and increase recycling rates of a widely used material.¹⁰⁸

Further information about these schemes and about the materials they may include is provided below.

Scottish Government plans for a DRS

The Scottish Government has been working towards establishing a DRS for several years. In particular, section 84 of the [Climate Change \(Scotland\) Act 2009](#) provided powers for ministers to make regulations to introduce a deposit and return scheme. Further information about the background work is provided on by Zero Waste Scotland (a not-for-profit environmental organisation funded by the Scottish Government) on its webpage, [Towards a deposit return scheme in Scotland: the background](#).

The background work included a June 2018 consultation on a [Deposit Return Scheme for Scotland](#), which sought views on the options for distinct elements of a deposit return scheme on beverage containers, seeking views on “which options will deliver the best results for Scotland.”¹⁰⁹ In February 2019 the Scottish Government published an independent analysis of the consultation responses.¹¹⁰

On 8 May 2019 Roseanna Cunningham, the Cabinet Secretary for Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform, [updated the Scottish Parliament on plans for a DRS](#). Ms Cunningham confirmed that it would cover metal cans, polyethylene terephthalate (PET) and glass, but that it would not cover high-density polyethylene (HDPE, a sturdy, hard plastic used for drinks bottles) due to concerns about contamination. She also proposed a deposit level of 20 pence.¹¹¹ Drinks containers above 50 ml and up to 3 litres in size in the materials covered would be included.¹¹²

¹⁰⁷ British Glass, [Evidence shows glass in Deposit Return Schemes drives increase in plastic](#) (accessed 13 March 2024)

¹⁰⁸ Edie, [UK's Deposit Return Scheme for drinks packaging set to exclude glass](#), 20 January 2023

¹⁰⁹ Scottish Government website, [A Deposit Return Scheme for Scotland](#) (accessed 18 March 2024)

¹¹⁰ Scottish Government website, [Deposit return scheme consultation: analysis of responses](#), 21 February 2019

¹¹¹ SP, [8 May 2019](#), Deposit Return Scheme

¹¹² Zero Waste Scotland, [Thousands of littered bottles and cans set to vanish thanks to deposit return scheme](#), 28 July 2019

Draft legislation to implement the scheme and a further consultation was published by the Scottish Government in September 2019.¹¹³

[The Deposit and Return Scheme for Scotland Regulations 2020](#) (No.154), were made on 19 May 2020 and created the legal framework for the scheme. The [Environmental Regulation \(Enforcement Measures\) \(Scotland\) Amendment Order 2020](#) has also been made, giving additional powers to the Scottish Environmental Protection Agency (SEPA) to enforce the scheme.

The scheme was initially expected to begin in July 2022, but was then delayed to 16 August 2023, due to, “challenges that the pandemic and Brexit” have placed upon businesses.¹¹⁴ In April 2023 it was announced that it would be delayed until 1 March 2024.¹¹⁵ In June 2023 the Scottish Government said that its scheme will be delayed further, until at least October 2025, “as a consequence of the UK Government’s refusal to agree a full exclusion from the Internal Market Act.”¹¹⁶

UK Internal Market issues

The [United Kingdom Internal Market Act 2020](#) created a presumption of mutual recognition and non-discrimination across the UK-wide shared market. This means that that (in general) goods, services and professional qualifications that can be sold or recognised in one part of the UK should be able to be sold or recognised in any other part, regardless of what the law in that other part of the UK says.

The UK Government’s July 2020 paper on the [UK Internal Market](#), gave the example of different recycling regimes for single-use drinks containers as an area of where future divergence across the UK could cause complexities.¹¹⁷ For further information and commentary on this area see the Scottish Parliament Information Centre (SPICe) briefing, [The UK Internal Market Bill – a threat to the circular economy in Scotland?](#), October 2020.

The Scottish Government applied for an exclusion for its DRS from the UK Internal Market Act 2020 provisions.¹¹⁸ If granted, the intention was that the Scottish DRS would begin in March 2024.¹¹⁹

In May 2023 the UK Government granted a temporary exclusion from the UK Internal Market provisions, with conditions attached: see [Policy statement: Scottish Deposit Return Scheme - UK internal market exclusion](#). The

¹¹³ Scottish Government, [The Deposit and Return Scheme for Scotland Regulations 2020: accompanying statement and proposed regulations](#), September 2019

¹¹⁴ Scottish Government, [Scotland’s deposit return scheme](#), 14 December 2021

¹¹⁵ Association of Convenience Stores, [Scottish Deposit Return Scheme Delayed Until March 2024](#), 18 April 2023

¹¹⁶ Scottish Government, [Deposit Return](#), 7 June 2023

¹¹⁷ HM Government, [UK Internal Market](#), July 2020, p77

¹¹⁸ HM Government, [Policy statement: Scottish Deposit Return Scheme - UK internal market exclusion](#), 27 May 2023

¹¹⁹ Scottish Government, [letter from First Minister Humza Yousaf to Prime Minister Rishi Sunak](#), dated 2 June 2023

temporary exclusion would cover the period from the launch of the Scottish Government DRS until planned schemes were in place in the rest of the UK. It would cover PET plastic, aluminium, and steel cans only. It would not cover glass. The UK Government stated there was insufficient justification for divergence on glass due to adding cost and complexity:

...this type of permanent divergence would be a very significant step for businesses and consumers, and there is insufficient justification for such an approach. The inclusion of glass would add cost and complexity to the schemes in particular to hospitality and retail sectors, as well as adding consumer inconvenience.¹²⁰

Scotland's [First Minister Humza Yousaf wrote to Prime Minister Rishi Sunak](#) on 2 June 2023 to set out his concerns about the UK Government's decision. In it, Mr Yousaf stated that the removal of glass would threaten the viability of the scheme:

Specifically, the letter [from the UK Government] sets out that the UK Government is only prepared to agree to a temporary exclusion if we remove glass, agree a UK-wide cap on deposit levels, achieve reconciliation between scheme administrators to ensure fair distribution of payments, have one administration fee per participating company, and agreement of a single common UK logo. The removal of glass fundamentally threatens the viability of Scotland's DRS with reduced revenue for the scheme administrator.

Removing glass will also have a significant impact on business. For example, C&C Group – owners of the iconic Tennent's brand – has been explicit that the decision by the UK Government to remove glass threatens investment and jobs. Other Scottish businesses have raised similar concerns privately with us.¹²¹

The UK Government's reply to this letter does not appear to have been published in full, but some news articles have published extracts of it, including the BBC, which set out the UK Government's views on why glass was excluded:

In their letter to Mr Yousaf, the UK ministers said: "Interoperability of schemes across the whole UK ensures all manufacturers, whether in Clydebank, Carlisle, Cardiff, or Carrickfergus, have the same access to sell their products across the UK internal market.

"The exclusion of glass also ensures consumer choice is not restricted in Scotland, given the risk that differences in scope would have led to some producers choosing not to supply Scotland through online or physical sales.

"There is nothing to prevent you from proceeding with your own scheme next March, on the basis that it would form part of a UK-wide solution to protect our shared market and increase recycling from 2025."¹²²

¹²⁰ HM Government, [Policy statement: Scottish Deposit Return Scheme - UK internal market exclusion](#), 27 May 2023

¹²¹ Scottish Government, [letter from First Minister Humza Yousaf to Prime Minister Rishi Sunak](#), dated 2 June 2023

¹²² BBC News, [UK ministers reject deposit return scheme glass rethink](#), 5 June 2023

On 7 June 2023 the Scottish Government published a statement confirming that it would delay the introduction of a DRS until October 2025, “at the earliest”.¹²³

These issues are also set out in the Commons Library Insight, [Will glass shatter plans for UK deposit return schemes?](#), 28 November 2023.

England, Wales and Northern Ireland DRS plans

The UK Government, Wales and Northern Ireland have stated their intention to introduce a deposit return scheme, which is expected to commence in October 2025.¹²⁴ There has been speculation by the drinks manufacturing industry, however, that the start date may be further delayed until due to the time needed to put in place all the investment and infrastructure needed to operate the scheme.¹²⁵ A February 2024 article in The Grocer speculated that it could be delayed until 2028 or 2029.¹²⁶ The DRS in England and Northern Ireland is not expected to include glass bottles, while the DRS for Wales is expected to include glass bottles.

Provisions to establish a DRS in England, Wales and Northern Ireland are contained in section 54 and schedule 8 of the [Environment Act 2021](#). These provisions will allow the relevant national authority – the Secretary of State, Welsh Ministers and the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs in Northern Ireland, – to make regulations establishing deposit schemes.¹²⁷ The Act itself does not say what materials will be included within a deposit scheme, nor at what price the deposit would be set.

The UK Government’s December 2018 [Resources and Waste Strategy](#) confirmed plans to introduce a deposit return scheme in England, subject to consultation. Introducing a deposit return scheme for plastic and glass was one of the pledges in the [2019 Conservative Party Manifesto](#) (PDF).

A number of consultations have since taken place. In February 2019 the UK and Welsh Governments, alongside the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA) in Northern Ireland published a [Consultation on introducing a Deposit Return Scheme in England, Wales and Northern Ireland](#). The consultation proposed a broad range of drinks containers for inclusion within the scope of the DRS:

This consultation proposes that the materials included in a DRS could be PET and HDPE plastic bottles, steel and aluminium cans, and glass bottles. We are proposing that a broad range of drinks, including water, soft drinks, juices, alcohol, and milk-containing drinks, where they are sold in containers made of these materials, could be included in a DRS. We would not propose including milk (or plant-based drinks such as soya) within scope of a DRS as it is

¹²³ Scottish Government, [Deposit Return](#), 7 June 2023

¹²⁴ HM Government, [Environmental Improvement Plan](#), January 2023, p12

¹²⁵ The Grocer, [Deposit return scheme set for delay to 2026 ‘at earliest’](#), 30 August 2023

¹²⁶ The Grocer, [DRS delays drag on, but what’s stopping progress?](#) 15 February 2024

¹²⁷ HM Government, Environment Bill: Explanatory notes, p61

considered by many as an essential product which is only widely available in containers.¹²⁸

The government responded to the consultation on 23 July 2019 with the publication of two documents:

- [Introducing a Deposit Return Scheme \(DRS\) in England, Wales and Northern Ireland: Summary of responses](#); and
- [Introducing a Deposit Return Scheme \(DRS\) in England, Wales and Northern Ireland: Executive summary and next steps](#)

The executive summary document stated that respondents to the consultation “overwhelmingly agreed (84%) with the proposed principles of a DRS”¹²⁹ and that “the majority of respondents wanted all materials included in a DRS.”¹³⁰

A further consultation document and accompanying [impact assessment](#) (PDF) was published in March 2021, [Introducing a Deposit Return Scheme in England, Wales and Northern Ireland: second consultation](#). This consultation sought views on what materials should be included within the scope of the scheme. In relation to glass, the government summarised both support and concerns about its inclusion:

There was also strong support for the inclusion of glass bottles in the first consultation (86%). Developing a deposit return scheme which captures glass bottles within its scope is part of the manifesto commitment upon which Government was elected. However, we recognise concerns raised by industry regarding the inclusion of glass in a deposit return scheme. The main concerns raised were the significant increase in handling costs and equipment complexity due to the weight of glass; that given the weight of glass packaging consumers may prefer not to take their glass packaging back to return points and that, by taking the majority of glass out of kerbside recycling, the recycling of the remaining glass collected at kerbside could be undermined.¹³¹

A [government response](#) to this consultation was published in January 2023.¹³² The response confirmed that glass bottles would not be included in schemes in England and Northern Ireland, due to it adding “additional complexity and challenges to delivery of DRS, in particular for the hospitality and retail sectors, as well as additional consumer inconvenience.”¹³³ The response confirmed however, that glass would be included in the Welsh DRS:

Acknowledging the consultation responses advocating for the inclusion of as wide a range of materials as possible and also advances in digital DRS technology solutions that could allow bottle deposit return via existing

¹²⁸ [Consultation on introducing a Deposit Return Scheme in England, Wales and Northern Ireland](#), 18 February 2019, p6

¹²⁹ HM Government, [Introducing a Deposit Return Scheme \(DRS\) in England, Wales and Northern Ireland: Executive summary and next steps](#), July 2019, para 18

¹³⁰ HM Government, [Introducing a Deposit Return Scheme \(DRS\) in England, Wales and Northern Ireland: Executive summary and next steps](#), July 2019, para 27

¹³¹ HM Government, [Introducing a Deposit Return Scheme in England, Wales and Northern Ireland: second consultation](#), March 2021, p28

¹³² HM Government, [Deposit Return Scheme consultation - government response](#), January 2023

¹³³ HM Government, [Deposit Return Scheme consultation - government response](#), January 2023, p11

kerbside collection infrastructure thereby reducing the reliance on return to retailer reverse vending machines, against a higher baseline recycling rate the inclusion of glass provides an overall better rate of return from the economic impact assessment of the scheme in Wales. Welsh Government is therefore progressing with the option as set out in the consultation to introduce an all-in DRS in Wales which includes polyethylene terephthalate plastic, steel and aluminium cans, and glass bottles.¹³⁴

Welsh Government statements on glass

The Welsh Government has said it expects to be able to retain glass in its DRS and that its plans to include it have not changed, despite the UK Government decision not to include glass in Scotland's UK Internal Market Act exclusion.¹³⁵ The Welsh Government has been clear in statements that it expects to be able to retain glass in its DRS, as reported in online publication, Holyrood:

The Cardiff government told Holyrood its plans to include glass have not changed, following a consultation carried out with the UK Government, with which it is working on a joint project to implement a DRS covering Wales, England and Northern Ireland. When the research took place, the materials involved were consistent with those for Scotland's DRS, with glass removed by the Westminster as the design of the scheme was finalised. According to the Labour-led Welsh Government, the decision that UK ministers made for England "should not in any way limit the ability of the Welsh Government" to follow its plans. "The Welsh Government has not sought an exclusion from the UK Internal Market Act and we do not recognise that the UK Internal Market Act limits the ability of the Welsh Government to legislate in areas of devolved competence," it said.¹³⁶

The UK Government has not commented on whether including glass in the Welsh DRS would need a UK Internal Market Act exemption.

7.5

Household and non-household recycling reform

The UK Government has legislated for and consulted on requiring local authorities to collect a core set of recyclable materials from households and businesses across England, which includes plastics among other materials.

In Wales there are proposals for greater consistency in business recycling, which will include plastics.

The Scottish Government has looked at whether to expand on voluntary guidance about household recycling collections.

¹³⁴ HM Government, [Deposit Return Scheme consultation - government response](#), January 2023, p11

¹³⁵ Letsrecycle.com [Wales 'intent' on including glass in DRS](#), 14 June 2023

¹³⁶ Holyrood, [Is Scotland's Deposit Return Scheme all washed up?](#), 4 June 2023

In Northern Ireland, DAERA published a discussion document in 2020 proposing that all councils should be required to collect the same set of core materials for household recycling.

This section sets out these proposals in more detail.

England: household and non-household municipal premises standardised collections

The UK Government has announced that all local authorities in England must collect the same recyclable waste streams for recycling or composting from households and non-household municipal premises (such as businesses, schools and hospitals). The aim is to drive up rates of recycling. This is expected to apply from 31 March 2025 for non-household municipal premises and from 31 March 2026 for households .¹³⁷

The recyclable waste streams include paper and card, plastic, glass, metal, food waste, and garden waste. The government would amend regulations to allow these materials to be collected together in one recycling bin (co-mingled).¹³⁸

Section 57 of the [Environment Act 2021](#) contains provisions to allow the government to amend household waste requirements to “ensure a consistent approach to recycling.”¹³⁹

For plastics, the exact materials expected to be included are:

- plastic bottles made of polyethylene terephthalate (PET, including amorphous, recycled PET), polypropylene (PP) and high-density polyethylene (HDPE)
- pots, tubs and trays made of PET (including amorphous, recycled and crystalline PET), PP (including expanded PP) and polyethylene (PE)
- PE and PP plastic tubes larger than 50mm x 50mm
- cartons for food, drink and other liquids, including aseptic and chilled cartons
- plastic film packaging and plastic bags made of mono-polyethylene (mono-PE), mono-polypropylene (mono-PP) and mixed

¹³⁷ HM Government, [Consistency in household and business recycling in England Consultation outcome Government response](#), Updated 21 November 2023

¹³⁸ HM Government, [Consistency in household and business recycling in England Consultation outcome Government response](#), Updated 21 November 2023

¹³⁹ HM Government, [Queen's Speech December 2019: background briefing notes](#), 19 December 2019, p112

polyolefins PE and PP, including those metallised through vacuum or vapour deposition (to be included from 31 March 2027)¹⁴⁰

This proposal follows several rounds of consultation, where the original proposal was to require a core set of dry recyclable materials to be collected in separate recycling bins. The government explained that it had, “listened to councils and householders who are concerned about the risk of too many bins cluttering our streets.”¹⁴¹

The previous consultations were:

- [Consultation on Consistency in Household and Business Recycling Collections in England](#), February 2019 and [Executive summary and government response](#), July 2019.
- [Consistency in Household and Business Recycling in England](#), 7 May 2021 and [Consultation outcome government response](#), October 2023.

Wales: consistency in business recycling

On 23 September 2019 the Welsh Government published a consultation, [Increasing Business Recycling in Wales](#). It proposed to require the occupiers of non-domestic premises (such as businesses, charities, and public sector bodies) to present specified recyclable materials for collection separately from each other and from residual waste. The recyclable materials to be specified for separate collection are paper, card, plastic, metal, glass, food, textiles and small waste electrical and electronic equipment (WEEE).¹⁴²

A [summary of responses](#) was published in March 2021. It confirmed that the Welsh Government would go ahead with legislation to introduce these recycling requirements.¹⁴³ This was also confirmed in the Welsh Government’s March 2021 document, [Beyond Recycling: A strategy to make the circular economy in Wales a reality](#).¹⁴⁴

Two further consultations on the measures were published in November 2022:

- [Consultation on the Separate Collection of Waste Materials for Recycling - A Code of Practice for Wales](#) – setting out how separate collections would work. A [summary of responses](#) (PDF) was published in April 2023.

¹⁴⁰ HM Government, [Consistency in household and business recycling in England Consultation outcome Government response](#), Updated 21 November 2023

¹⁴¹ HM Government, [Consistency in household and business recycling in England Consultation outcome Government response](#), Updated 21 November 2023

¹⁴² Welsh Government, [Increasing Business Recycling in Wales](#), 23 September 2019, p8

¹⁴³ Welsh Government, [Consultation – summary of responses: Increasing Business recycling in Wales](#), March 2021, p19

¹⁴⁴ Welsh Government, [Beyond Recycling: A strategy to make the circular economy in Wales a reality](#), March 2021, p24

- [Proposals for enforcing business, public and third sector recycling regulations in Wales](#) – how it will be enforced. A [summary of responses](#) (PDF) was published in April 2023.

In November 2022 the Welsh Government announced that the new rules, as provided for by the [Waste Separation Requirements \(Wales\) Regulations 2023](#) (SI 2023/1290) will apply from 6 April 2024. See Welsh Government guidance, [Separated waste collections for workplaces](#). The regulator, Natural Resources Wales (NRW) will regulate the separation requirements.

Scotland: improve household and business recycling

In the Scottish Government's [Delivering Scotland's circular economy - route map to 2025 and beyond: consultation](#), May 2022, it set out proposals to improve recycling by households and businesses. Among other measures it proposed introducing guidance on materials to be collected for recycling:

We believe there is a need for statutory guidance to ensure that services are high performing in different local contexts, maximising participation, material capture, and quality given the demographics, housing stock, and geography. If this measure is taken forward, we will build on the existing Recycling Charter and Code of Practice, including the findings from our ongoing Code of Practice review. We would also consider our approach to recycling a range of other materials not currently covered by the majority of kerbside collection services in Scotland.¹⁴⁵

A [consultation analysis](#) was published in July 2023. A further consultation was published in January 2024, [Circular economy and waste route map to 2030: consultation](#) which proposed a “priority action” to develop a statutory code of practice for household waste services (by 2025/26), to improve consistency of services. The consultation closed on 15 March 2024. The [Circular Economy \(Scotland\) Bill](#), published June 2023, would require local authorities to comply with a code of practice on collection and recycling.

Northern Ireland: household recycling

In June 2020 DAERA published a discussion document, [Future Recycling and Separate Collection of Waste of a Household Nature in Northern Ireland](#). It proposed that all councils in Northern Ireland should be required to collect a core set of dry recyclable materials at kerbside from houses and flats:

...we want every Council in Northern Ireland to collect from households the same range of dry recyclable materials. We think this should include: plastic bottles and plastic pots tubs and trays, glass packaging (bottles and jars), paper and card, and metal packaging. It could also include food and drink cartons. We are seeking views on how best to achieve these changes and what materials to include views on whether statutory guidance to Councils on minimum service standards for waste management would help to support Councils to deliver these changes. These services should be supported by

¹⁴⁵ Scottish Government, [Delivering Scotland's circular economy - route map to 2025 and beyond: consultation](#), May 2022

regular and frequent residual waste collections and we seek views on whether the guidance should include advice on minimum frequency for this service.¹⁴⁶

A response has not been published.

7.6 A charge for other single use plastic items

In its March 2021 consultation on a new [Waste Prevention Programme for England: Towards a Resource Efficient Economy](#), the UK Government said that it would consider “building on the success of its single use carrier charge, by seeking a new power in the Environment Bill to place charges on other single-use plastic items to encourage businesses and citizens to shift toward more reusable products.”¹⁴⁷ The consultation did not say which items would be covered.

This power, which applies to single use items (not just plastic) in England and Wales and to single use plastic items in Northern Ireland, is now provided in section 55 and Schedule 9 of the [Environment Act 2021](#).

7.7 Encouraging the use of reusable and refillable packaging

In the policy paper, [The waste prevention programme for England: Maximising Resources, Minimising Waste](#), updated August 2023, the UK Government said that it will consider measures to encourage the use of reusable and refillable packaging. This would include “completing the review of the [Packaging \(Essential Requirements\) Regulations 2015](#) and considering the extent to which measures could be introduced under packaging Extended Producer Responsibility or other means to incentivise more reuse and refill of packaging.” The government suggested that actions that “could” be taken by businesses included:

1. Increasing the sale of unpackaged products: [advice from the Waste and Resources Action Programme and the UK Plastics Pact](#) in February 2022 provides evidence that supports selling fresh fruit and vegetables loose.
2. Providing and using refill systems and services. The Waste and Resources Action Programme is supporting UK Plastics Pact members to develop reuse and refill systems. This includes work to develop a blueprint for standardising reuse and refill systems and achieving this activity at scale, developing guidance and providing UK Plastics Pact members with one-

¹⁴⁶ Northern Ireland Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, [Future Recycling and Separate Collection of Waste of a Household Nature in Northern Ireland](#), June 2020, p19

¹⁴⁷ HM Government, consultation on [Waste Prevention Programme for England: Towards a Resource Efficient Economy](#), March 2021, p54

to-one support on piloting reuse and refill packaging systems or encouraging reuse behaviours, with the aim of scaling up reuse by 2025.

3. Removing the worst offending products from the market (for example, plastic straws, microbeads and plastic stirrers) that is those that cannot be reused or recycled.
4. Designing products and packaging to reduce the likelihood of them becoming waste.¹⁴⁸

7.8 Funding to reduce plastic waste

This section sets out some of the current funding pledged by the UK and devolved governments for plastics research and innovation.

Industrial Strategy Challenge Fund's Smart Sustainable Plastic Packaging Challenge (SSPP)

The Industrial Strategy Challenge Fund was established by the (then) Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, to support the aim of the government's 2017 Industrial Strategy to raise long-term productivity and living standards.¹⁴⁹ As part of this, UK Research and Innovation (UKRI, a non-departmental public body sponsored by the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology) leads a coalition that aims to make the UK a leader in sustainable plastic packaging. The government is investing up to £60 million in this initiative, which is expected to be matched by up to £149 million from industry.¹⁵⁰ The scheme runs until 2025. Further information about the fund and the projects it has funded and funding available are available from the UKRI webpage, [Smart sustainable plastic packaging](#).

Wales: circular economy fund

In April 2019 the Welsh Government launched a £6.5 million circular economy fund which offers grants to businesses of any size seeking capital investment funding to increase their use of recycled materials (not just plastic) in manufactured products, components or packaging.¹⁵¹ For further information see Business Wales, [Circular Economy Funding](#).

¹⁴⁸ HM Government, [The waste prevention programme for England: Maximising Resources, Minimising Waste](#), updated August 2023

¹⁴⁹ HM Government, [Industrial Strategy](#), November 2017

¹⁵⁰ UKRI, [The plastics paradox](#), updated 4 March 2021

¹⁵¹ Welsh Government, [£6.5 million Circular Economy Fund launches to increase the use of recycled materials](#), 29 April 2019

Scotland: Circular Economy Investment Fund and Zero Plastic Waste Towns

In Scotland, Zero Waste Scotland's Circular Economy Investment Fund and business support services, has made investments of £5.8 million in domestic projects and given support to 164 businesses to develop circular economy products or services.¹⁵² For further information see Zero Waste Scotland, [Circular economy business support](#), 13 April 2023.

¹⁵² Scottish Government, [Developing Scotland's circular economy: Proposals for Legislation, November 2019, p9](#)

8

Select Committee scrutiny

Parliamentary select committees have produced reports which cover some of the government's policies in respect of plastic waste. See in particular:

- Committee of Public Accounts, [The government's resources and waste reforms for England](#), 1 December 2023.
- Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee, [The price of plastic: ending the toll of plastic waste](#), 7 November 2022, with related [government response](#), published 27 January 2023.
- Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee, [Plastic food and drink packaging](#), 12 September 2019 and related [government response](#) (PDF), published 11 March 2020.
- The Environmental Audit Committee held an inquiry, [Next steps for deposit return schemes](#), in 2021, but did not publish a report.

9 Stakeholder plastics initiatives

There are many non-government initiatives, from stakeholders including businesses, suppliers, packaging producers, manufacturers and retailers, that also aim to change the way that plastics are designed, produced, used, re-used, disposed of and reprocessed in the UK. Examples of these are provided below.

9.1 The Plastics Pact

The charity the Waste and Resources Action Programme (WRAP) coordinates the “Plastics Pact”, a voluntary collaboration which brings together businesses from across the plastics value chain, including supermarkets, retailers and manufacturers. Pact members sign up to a set of targets:

- Target 1: Problematic or unnecessary single-use packaging will be eliminated, through redesign, innovation or reuse
- Target 2: 100% of plastics packaging will be reusable, recyclable or compostable
- Target 3: 70% of plastics packaging will be effectively recycled or composted
- Target 4: All plastic packaging will include an average of 30% recycled content

Further information about the pact and pledges taken are available from the [WRAP website](#). WRAP published a [UK Plastics Pact Annual Report 2022-23](#) which reported the latest progress against the above targets:

- Target 1: 99.6% reduction in problematic plastic items.
- Target 2: 71% of plastic packaging is recyclable.
- Target 3: 55% of plastic packaging is effectively recycled or composted.
- Target 4: 24% average recycled content levels in plastic packaging.¹⁵³

The annual report noted that the targets were set with an expectation that government policy measures such as consistent recycling collections and extended producer responsibility reform would be in place by 2025. As these will not now be in place by 2025, WRAP states that targets 2 and 3 will not be met. WRAP has encouraged Pact members to get as close as possible to these targets by 2025.¹⁵⁴

¹⁵³ WRAP, [UK Plastics Pact Annual Report 2022-23](#), undated, accessed 13 February 2024

¹⁵⁴ WRAP, [UK Plastics Pact Annual Report 2022-23](#), undated, accessed 18 March 2024

9.2 The UK Circular Plastics Network (UKCPN)

The [UK Circular Plastics Network](#) (UKCPN) aims to bring together plastic product users through a programme of networking and knowledge-sharing events and related support activities. The idea is to create a community of stakeholders, to examine the best means for reducing plastic waste entering the environment. UKCPN is an activity supported by UKRI and Innovate UK (the UK's national innovation agency).

9.3 Personal food containers and reusable cups

Many businesses will allow customers to bring in and use their own containers for food products. The aim of refill shops is to reduce the amount of single use packaging required. For examples, see:

- Which? [Which supermarkets have packaging-free products?](#) 10 July 2021
- Recycle Now, [Refill shops: Everything you need to know](#) (accessed 18 March 2024)

Some coffee shops offer a discount on takeaway hot drinks when people bring in their own reusable cups. See for example:

- Totum, [How To Get Free Coffee](#), 13 November 2023
- Ocean Finance, [Which coffee shops offer the best discounts for using eco coffee cups?](#), 29 January 2020

9.4 Changing plastic packaging

Rather than allowing customers to bring in their own containers, some supermarkets and manufacturers have focussed their efforts on reducing packaging and ensuring that any packaging that cannot be reduced is more easily and widely recyclable. For examples of this work see:

- Sustainability Beat, [Tackling packaging waste: 4 game-changing sustainable initiatives](#), 7 February 2024
- The Grocery Gazette, [Plastic-free produce: are supermarkets and shoppers ready for loose fruit and veg?](#) 12 April 2023
- Which?, [What are supermarkets doing about plastic?](#) July 2021
- Greenpeace, [Plastic packaging: which supermarket topped this year's league table?](#), 26 January 2021

10 Plastic in the marine environment

10.1 Amounts of plastic in the marine environment

Estimates vary as to how much plastic is in the world's oceans, marine or aquatic environments. In 2021 the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) estimated that there were 75 to 199 million tonnes of plastic in oceans across the world.¹⁵⁵ A November 2023 OECD report estimated there were around 152 million tonnes of plastic in aquatic environments in 2020.¹⁵⁶

In 2020 the Pew Charitable Trusts reported that plastic waste was entering the ocean at a rate of about 11 million metric tons a year.¹⁵⁷ In 2021 the environment network, the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) estimated that “at least 14 million tons of plastic end up in the ocean every year.” It said that plastic debris was “currently the most abundant type of litter in the ocean, making up 80% of all marine debris found from surface waters to deep-sea sediments.”¹⁵⁸

10.2 Effect of plastic in the marine environment

An IUCN 2021 article summarised the direct harm that plastics can cause to aquatic creatures:

The most visible impacts of plastic debris are the ingestion, suffocation and entanglement of hundreds of marine species. Marine wildlife such as seabirds, whales, fish and turtles mistake plastic waste for prey; most then die of starvation as their stomachs become filled with plastic. They also suffer from lacerations, infections, reduced ability to swim, and internal injuries. Floating plastics also help transport invasive marine species, thereby threatening marine biodiversity and the food web.¹⁵⁹

Plastics can eventually degrade into micro-plastics, which can then enter the food chain. The 2021 UNEP report summarised the harms that ingesting microplastics can cause to marine creatures:

¹⁵⁵ UNEP, [From pollution to solution a global assessment of marine litter and plastic pollution](#) (PDF), 2021, p14

¹⁵⁶ OECD, [Towards Eliminating Plastic Pollution by 2040 A Policy Scenario Analysis: interim findings](#) (PDF), November 2023, p6

¹⁵⁷ Pew, [Breaking the Plastic Wave: Top Findings for Preventing Plastic Pollution](#), 23 July 2020

¹⁵⁸ IUCN, [Marine Plastic Pollution](#), November 2021

¹⁵⁹ IUCN, [Marine Plastic Pollution](#), November 2021

When microplastics are ingested, they can cause changes in gene and protein expression, inflammation, disruption of feeding behaviour, decreases in growth, changes in brain development, and reduced filtration and respiration rates. They can alter the reproductive success and survival of marine organisms and compromise the ability of keystone species and ecological “engineers” to build reefs or bioturbated sediments.¹⁶⁰

For background information see POST Note [Marine Microplastic Pollution](#), June 2016.

10.3 Sources of marine plastic

A 2022 report from the OECD noted that rivers are the main route by which plastics enter the ocean, but the process can take years or even decades.¹⁶¹

The 2021 UNEP report explained that microplastics can enter the oceans through the breakdown of larger plastic items, the breakdown of materials leaching from landfill sites, sludge from wastewater treatment systems, airborne particles (for example from wear and tear on tyres and other items containing plastic), run-off from agriculture, shipbreaking, and accidental cargo losses at sea.¹⁶²

The report also noted that extreme events such as floods, storms and tsunamis can deliver “significant volumes of debris into the oceans from coastal areas and accumulations of litter on riverbanks, along shorelines and in estuaries.”¹⁶³

The UNEP has an interactive website, [Our planet is choking on plastic](#), with maps of which rivers plastics come from. It also shows countries where plastic waste is “mismanaged”.

Microfibres

The shedding of microfibres from clothes and textiles can also be a source of marine plastic pollution. Synthetic textiles, such as polyester, polyamide and acrylic can contain plastic. The plastic most commonly used in textiles is polyethylene terephthalate (PET) or polyester.¹⁶⁴

A December 2022 article from the journal *Science of the Total Environment*, [Characterization of microfibers emission from textile washing from a domestic](#)

¹⁶⁰ UNEP, [From pollution to solution a global assessment of marine litter and plastic pollution](#) (PDF), 2021, p15

¹⁶¹ OECD, [Global plastics outlook](#), Plastics flows and their impacts on the environment, February 2022

¹⁶² UNEP, [From pollution to solution a global assessment of marine litter and plastic pollution](#) (PDF), 2021, p15

¹⁶³ UNEP, [From pollution to solution a global assessment of marine litter and plastic pollution](#) (PDF), 2021, p15

¹⁶⁴ Environmental Audit Committee, [Fixing fashion: clothing consumption and sustainability](#), 19 February 2019, p31

[environment](#), highlighted that a single full load of laundry has the potential to emit hundreds and thousands of microfibres and microplastics that are flushed into aquatic and marine environments:

Polyester garments were also observed to shed a huge number of fibers, up to 1900 fibers per wash, and for a reference load of 6 kg of synthetic fabrics about 1,40,000–7,00,000 fibers could be released per wash (Browne et al., 2011; Napper and Thompson, 2016). Several factors affect the amount and length of microfibers released during the washing process. Mechanical stress and abrasion caused during the washing and drying process (De Falco et al., 2019), choice of detergent liquid/powder and addition of fabric softener and their respective quantities (Hernandez et al., 2017), the temperature of the washing water having an increasing effect on the number of microfibers released (Yang et al., 2019; Pirc et al., 2016; Zambrano et al., 2019). From these studies, it can be estimated that the most important variables for the generation of microfibers during the laundry process can be linked to mechanical stress, detergent usage, and water temperature.¹⁶⁵

A January 2024 article in The Conversation, [Laundry is a top source of microplastic pollution – here’s how to clean your clothes more sustainably](#), explained that although advanced treatment plants can remove up to 99% of microfibres from water, as a single laundry load can produce millions of fibres, treated water discharged from the plant still contains a huge number of them. The articles also set out that microfibres that are removed during treatment end up in sewage sludge. This treated sewage sludge is then applied to soil as a fertiliser, which allows microfibres to enter air and soil.¹⁶⁶

10.4

Domestic policies to tackle marine plastic waste

While the policies set out in section 7 may aim to reduce the amount of waste entering the seas and oceans, governments in the UK also have specific policies aimed at marine plastics, as well as specific funding commitments.

Marine litter Strategies

Marine litter has been defined by UN Environment Programme as, “any persistent, manufactured or processed solid material discarded, disposed of or abandoned in the marine and coastal environment.” The UN states that marine litter consists of items that have been made or used by people and deliberately discarded into the sea or rivers or on beaches; brought indirectly to the sea with rivers, sewage, storm water or winds; accidentally lost,

¹⁶⁵ Aligina Anvitha Sudheshna, Meenu Srivastava, C. Prakash, [Characterization of microfibers emission from textile washing from a domestic environment](#), Science of The Total Environment, Volume 852, December 2022

¹⁶⁶ The Conversation, [“Laundry is a top source of microplastic pollution – here’s how to clean your clothes more sustainably”](#), 12 January 2024

including material lost at sea in bad weather (such as fishing gear and cargo); or deliberately left by people on beaches and shores.¹⁶⁷

UK Government

In April 2017, the UK Government published a [Litter Strategy for England](#), which contained a section called Litter in Context – Aquatic and Marine Litter, which set out a number of government, business and community initiatives to tackle marine litter.¹⁶⁸

The UK Government’s January 2018 [25 Year Environment Plan](#) also contains a section on marine litter, setting out the government’s approach:

The UK is committed to leading efforts to protect the marine environment. To tackle marine pollution, we will pursue a sustainable, international and transboundary approach that prioritises reducing global reliance on plastics, increases economically viable recycling processes, and promotes maritime practices that prevent harmful matter entering the seas.¹⁶⁹

The UK Government’s January 2023 [Environmental Improvement Plan](#) (the update to the 25 Year Environment Plan), stated that the government will continue to deliver commitments from the Litter Strategy for England.¹⁷⁰ The government also has an outcome indicator to accompany the 25 Year Environment Plan, [C1: Clean seas: marine litter](#). The intention is that this indicator, once complete, will show changes in the amount of litter in the marine environment, including litter on beaches, on the seafloor and floating litter.¹⁷¹

Scottish Government

The Scottish Government published a “refreshed” [marine litter strategy](#) in September 2022 to replace the [Marine Litter Strategy for Scotland](#) published in 2014. The aim of the refreshed strategy is to “develop current and future measures to prevent litter from entering the marine and coastal environment, and to support its removal, in order to bring ecological, economic and social benefits.” It sets out future actions on sewage-related debris, plastic pellets, and fishing and aquaculture gear.

The Scottish Government also supports the Keep Scotland Beautiful [Upstream Battle campaign](#), which is also supported by plastics industry organisations. This campaign aims to prevent litter from entering the seas by working with communities by conducting litter surveys and clean ups along rivers and tributaries.

¹⁶⁷ United Nations Environment Programme, [Marine Litter](#) (accessed 18 March 2024)

¹⁶⁸ HM Government, [Litter Strategy for England](#), April 2017

¹⁶⁹ UK Government, [25 Year Environment Plan](#), January 2018, p92

¹⁷⁰ HM Government, [Environmental Improvement Plan](#), January 2023, p157

¹⁷¹ HM Government, [25 Year Environment Plan Outcome Indicator, C1 clean seas: marine litter](#) (accessed 18 March 2024)

Further work and initiatives are also set out in the Scottish Government's policy paper on the [Marine Environment](#).

Welsh Government

The Welsh Government has a [Marine Litter Action Plan](#), which is reviewed every three years. The document examines emerging threats and issues, alongside initiatives to tackle them. The most recent one is the [Marine Litter Action Plan 2020-23](#) (PDF). It states that the organisations and communities who form part of the Wales Clean Seas Partnership are working with Welsh Government to develop and implement the [Beyond Recycling strategy](#) (2021) and specifically the [Wales Litter Prevention Plan](#) (2021).

Northern Ireland

The Northern Ireland Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs has a [webpage on marine litter](#). This sets out work to tackle marine litter from voluntary and community organisations. It also highlights the Keep Northern Ireland Beautiful series of [annual marine litter reports](#), which show the amount of plastic waste reported on Northern Ireland's beaches.

Microbeads ban

A [joint-UK consultation](#) was completed in February 2017 to investigate a ban on the use of plastic microbeads in cosmetics and personal care products in the UK, and called for evidence on other sources of microplastics entering the marine environment. This was also the subject of a 2016 Environmental Audit Committee inquiry and report, [Environmental impact of microplastics](#) which had recommended a ban on microbeads from bathroom products.¹⁷²

Following this work the supply and manufacture of products containing microbeads has been restricted by the following regulations:

- In England by the [Environmental Protection \(Microbeads\) \(England\) Regulations 2017](#) (No.1312).
- In Scotland by the [Environmental Protection \(Microbeads\) \(Scotland\) Regulations 2018](#) (No.162).
- In Wales by the [Environmental Protection \(Microbeads\) \(Wales\) Regulations 2018](#) (No.151).
- In Northern Ireland by the [Environmental Protection \(Microbeads\) Regulations \(Northern Ireland\) 2019](#) (No.18)

Microfibres

In the 2018 Resources and Waste Strategy, the UK Government highlighted concerns about microfibres and the need for greater understanding about how plastic particles from a range of sources including synthetic materials

¹⁷² House of Commons Environmental Audit Committee, [MPs urge Government to ban microbeads in cosmetics](#), 24 August 2016

and textiles enter waterways and the marine environment through the shedding of microfibres.¹⁷³

The UK Government's [Plan for Water](#) (updated April 2023) said that it will "expect industry to develop low cost, effective microfibre filters on washing machine[s] and encourage their effective use." A December 2023 PQ response confirmed that the government would not use legislation to require microfibre filters to be fitted to new washing machines:

The majority of microfibres are removed through water treatment and analysis of the evidence available to date does not show that there is a sufficient benefit to the environment that can justify legislation to mandate the microfibre filters in new washing machines with prices ranging from £30 to £122 per machine, dependent on manufacturer and whether the filters are disposable or reusable. Defra's Plan for Water therefore includes a commitment for industry to develop low cost, effective microfibre filters on washing machines and encourage their effective use. We have met industry colleagues and posed this challenge and we look forward to any proposals they are able to share when they are able to do so.¹⁷⁴

Microplastics from the road network

National Highways, the UK Government-owned company responsible for motorways and major A roads, launched a research study in December 2020 to investigate whether surface water which runs off roads affects the level of microplastics in the environment.¹⁷⁵

A research report for National Highways by consultants Atkins and Jacobs was published in April 2023; [Microplastics and Contaminants of Concern in the Strategic Road Network](#) (PDF). The report found tyre wear particles (TWPs) to be a "significant source" of microplastics in aquatic ecosystems:

This study concludes highway runoff to be a significant source of anthropogenic debris, including microplastics, to aquatic ecosystems, with TWPs found to contribute a greater mass than other forms of microplastics. Although showing some variability, the removal of TWPs was typically effective within drainage ponds on the network. These findings are agreeable with previous research and have the potential to contribute towards improving the design, location and maintenance of highway drainage systems targeted towards reducing pollutant loading to surrounding environments.¹⁷⁶

In the UK Government's [Plan for Water](#) (updated April 2023) it noted that "Most microplastics entering the water environment from the strategic road network are from car tyres and road marking abrasions being washed into water bodies." The government said that consequently it would consider, "actions to reduce the impacts of the strategic road network on water quality

¹⁷³ HM Government, [Waste and Resources Strategy for England](#), December 2018, p42

¹⁷⁴ [Microplastics: Washing Machines](#), UIN HL422, tabled on 20 November 2023

¹⁷⁵ GOV.UK, [First phase of research paves the way for further studies on microplastics pollution. 30 December](#) 2020

¹⁷⁶ Atkins and Jacobs, , [Microplastics and Contaminants of Concern in the Strategic Road Network](#) (PDF), April 2023, p3

as part of developing the next Road Investment Strategy.” The current road investment strategy runs to 2025.

10.5 Other marine plastic initiatives

Examples of initiatives to deal with plastic pollution that have originated outside of government-led action include:

- [Operation clean sweep](#): a plastics industry initiative which aims to help plastic resin handling operations implement good housekeeping and pellet, flake, and powder containment practices.
- [Surfers Against Sewage](#), a campaign group which originated in the UK, with an aim to stop plastic pollution at source and clean up beaches.
- [Plastic Oceans](#), an international, US based organisation which organises awareness initiatives on plastic pollution.

11

International cooperation and agreements on plastics

The UK Government is involved at an international level with a range of initiatives to tackle plastic waste. The sections below highlight these international agreements and policies, some of which are broader than just plastic waste, but which are particularly pertinent to it. The aim of many of these is to raise awareness and commit other countries to taking action to reduce plastic waste. Many of the UK's actions to meet these international agreements are through the domestic policies outlined in section 7 of this paper.

11.1

UN Sustainable Development Goal 14

The [United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development](#) is a “plan of action for people, planet and prosperity” consisting of 17 Sustainable Development Goals. [UN Sustainable Development Goal \(SDG\) 14](#) aims to “Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development”. In September 2015, 193 Member States, including the UK, adopted this Agenda and committed themselves to working “tirelessly for the full implementation of this Agenda by 2030”.

SDG14 includes the target of:

By 2025, prevent and significantly reduce marine pollution of all kinds, in particular from land-based activities, including marine debris and nutrient pollution

Further information about SDG 14 and progress on it can be found on the [UN Sustainable Development Knowledge Platform](#). Data from the UK Government on this goal can be found on the [UK Sustainable Development Goals indicators website](#).

11.2

UN Environment Programme: resolution for a new international agreement on plastic pollution

A new legally binding instrument to address plastic pollution is being negotiated by the UN. The aim is to agree it by the end of 2024.

In March 2022, at the United Nations Environment Assembly, heads of state, ministers of environment and other representatives from 175 nations [signed a resolution committing to developing an international legally binding agreement](#) (PDF) by 2024, that addresses the full lifecycle of plastic pollution. This included the UK Government.

The resolution established an [Intergovernmental Negotiating Committee](#) (INC), which began work in 2022. The expectation is that the INC will produce a legally binding instrument which will address the full life cycle of plastic, including its production, design, and disposal.¹⁷⁷

Following the resolution, the UK Government published a press release, [UK backs ambitious global action to tackle plastic pollution](#), 2 March 2022, setting out its support for this work towards an international agreement.

As part of this work, the UK Government has joined what is called a ‘[High Ambition Coalition](#)’ (HAC) of countries. The coalition is co-chaired by Norway and Rwanda. In May 2023, 52 governments, including the UK Government, signed a [joint ministerial statement](#) which aimed to reinforce the commitment to end plastic pollution:

The Joint Ministerial Statement, published today, calls for a range of mandatory provisions to be included in the global plastic pollution treaty, currently under negotiation. These include reducing the production and consumption of primary plastic polymers to sustainable levels; eliminating and restricting unnecessary, avoidable or problematic plastics, chemicals and products; and eliminating the release of plastics into nature, amongst others.¹⁷⁸

Another group of countries, including Saudi Arabia, Iran, Cuba, Russia have officially formed a group called the ‘Global Coalition for Plastics Sustainability’. This group wants negotiations to focus on ways to recycle plastic, with countries left to determine their own targets.¹⁷⁹

The most recent INC session took place in Nairobi, Kenya in November 2023. At this session countries were given a document called a “[Zero draft text of the international legally binding instrument on plastic pollution, including in the marine environment](#)” (PDF) to begin negotiations from. Concerns have been raised by environmental groups, such as Greenpeace, about the presence of lobbyists at this session with interests in fossil fuels and petrochemicals.¹⁸⁰

Reports have indicated disagreement at the Nairobi session on whether the treaty should put a cap on plastic production, and if so, how ambitious that

¹⁷⁷ UN Environment Programme, [Historic day in the campaign to beat plastic pollution: Nations commit to develop a legally binding agreement](#), 2 March 2022

¹⁷⁸ GOV.UK, [UK strengthens pledge to end plastic pollution by 2040](#), 26 May 2023

¹⁷⁹ The Interpreter by the Lowry Institute, [Inside the tangled negotiations for a global plastic treaty](#), 30 November 2023

¹⁸⁰ Greenpeace, [UN INC3 ends in frustration as governments allow low ambition countries to derail Global Plastics Treaty](#), 19 November 2023

should be.¹⁸¹ The outgoing Chair of the INC, H.E. Mr. Gustavo Adolfo Meza-Cuadra Velasquez called the session a “significant step forward”, but noted that much more remained to be done:

These past 10 days have been a significant step forward towards the achievement of our objective to develop an international legally binding instrument to end plastic pollution. But it has also recalled us that much remains to be done both in narrowing down our differences and in developing technical work to inform our negotiations.¹⁸²

The next INC session will be held from 23 to 29 April 2024 in Ottawa, Canada.

11.3 The Ellen MacArthur and UNEP Global Commitment

The circular economy charity, the Ellen MacArthur Foundation, in collaboration with the UN Environment Programme, leads work on “the [Global Commitment](#)”, which was launched in 2018. This is a commitment made by more than 1,000 organisations and 55 governments from across the world behind a common vision of a circular economy for plastics, which aims to “eliminate the plastic we don’t need; innovate towards new materials and business models; and circulate everything that is used, to keep it in the economy and out of the environment.”¹⁸³ Further information about the Global Commitment, work and progress on it is available from the [Ellen MacArthur Foundation website](#).

11.4 The IMO (International Maritime Organization) “London Protocol”

The “Convention on the Prevention of Marine Pollution by Dumping of Wastes and Other Matter 1972”, (the “London Convention”), was one of the first global conventions to protect the marine environment from human activities and has been in force since 1975. In 1996, the “London Protocol” was agreed to further modernise the Convention and, eventually, replace it. Under the Protocol all dumping is prohibited, except for possibly acceptable wastes on a “reverse list”. The Protocol entered into force on 24 March 2006 and there are currently 53 Parties to the Protocol.¹⁸⁴

¹⁸¹ The Interpreter by the Lowry Institute, [Inside the tangled negotiations for a global plastic treaty](#), 30 November 2023

¹⁸² UNEP, [Press Release - 19 November 2023: Third session of negotiations on an international plastics treaty advance in Nairobi](#), 19 November 2023

¹⁸³ Ellen MacArthur Foundation, [The Global Commitment 2023 Progress Report](#) (PDF), 2023

¹⁸⁴ IMO website, [Convention on the Prevention of Marine Pollution by Dumping of Wastes and Other Matter](#) (accessed 18 March 2024)

The objective of the London Convention and Protocol is to promote the effective control of all sources of marine pollution. Contracting Parties “shall take effective measures to prevent pollution of the marine environment caused by dumping at sea” (see articles I and II of the Convention and article 2 of the Protocol).

Further information about the London Protocol is available on the [IMO website](#).

11.5

OSPAR Regional Action Plan on marine litter

The UK is an active participant in OSPAR (the Oslo and Paris Convention for the protection of the marine environment of the North-East Atlantic). This is a collaborative effort with neighbouring countries to address marine litter.

The OSPAR objective with regard to marine litter is “to substantially reduce marine litter in the OSPAR maritime area to levels where properties and quantities do not cause harm to the marine environment”, by 2020. To fulfil this objective OSPAR 2014 agreed a [Regional Action Plan \(RAP\) for Marine Litter](#) for the period 2014-2021. The RAP contains 55 collective and national actions which aim to address both land based and sea based sources.

In 2022 OSPAR adopted a second [Regional Action Plan for Marine Litter \(RAP-ML 2\)](#). Under RAP-ML 2 the UK is the lead country on a number of actions, including on identifying plastic materials in the marine environment and preventing and reducing marine litter from aquaculture (among other actions).

Further information is available on the OSPAR Commission website on [Marine Litter](#).

12

EU initiatives

The EU is focussing on moves towards a more circular economy. Action to reduce plastic consumption and waste is part of this. This section sets out recent and forthcoming EU initiatives and legislation in this area.

12.1

An EU Single Use Plastics Directive

A [European Strategy for Plastics in a Circular Economy](#) was adopted by the European Commission on 16 January 2018. A press release to accompany its adoption set out the ambition that “all plastic packaging on the EU market will be recyclable by 2030, the consumption of single-use plastics will be reduced and the intentional use of microplastics will be restricted.”¹⁸⁵

The EU Strategy examined ways to stimulate secondary markets for recycled plastic, alongside possible legislative and fiscal measures to make all plastic packaging recyclable by 2030. A full list of measures proposed in the Strategy and their proposed timelines are provided in [Annexes](#) to the Plastics Strategy. These are also summarised in the Commission’s brochure, [A European Strategy for plastics in a circular economy](#).

As part of the Strategy, a new Directive was agreed which aims to tackle marine litter coming from the 10 single-use plastic products most often found on European beaches, as well as abandoned fishing gear and oxo-degradable plastics.¹⁸⁶ This is [Directive \(EU\) 2019/904](#) of the European Parliament and of the Council of 5 June 2019 on the reduction of the impact of certain plastic products on the environment (Known as the “EU Single Use Plastics Directive”, or “SUP Directive”). A European Commission press release summarises the scope of the Directive:

- A ban on selected single-use products made of plastic for which alternatives exist on the market [as set out in Article 5 of the Directive]: cotton bud sticks, cutlery, plates, straws, stirrers, sticks for balloons, as well as cups, food and beverage containers made of expanded polystyrene and on all products made of oxo-degradable plastic.

¹⁸⁵ EU Commission, [Plastic Waste: a European strategy to protect the planet, defend our citizens and empower our industries](#), 16 January 2018

¹⁸⁶ European Commission - [Press release Circular Economy: Commission welcomes Council final adoption of new rules on single-use plastics to reduce marine plastic litter](#), 21 May 2019

- Measures to reduce consumption of food containers and beverage cups made of plastic and specific marking and labelling of certain products.
- Extended Producer Responsibility schemes covering the cost to clean-up litter, applied to products such as tobacco filters and fishing gear.
- A 90% separate collection target for plastic bottles by 2029 (77% by 2025) and the introduction of design requirements to connect caps to bottles, as well as target to incorporate 25% of recycled plastic in PET bottles as from 2025 and 30% in all plastic bottles as from 2030.¹⁸⁷

A European Commission press release from 21 May 2019 set out the next steps for the Directive and its transposition:

Today's decision by the Council of the EU will be followed by the publication of the texts in the Official Journal of the European Union. The Directive will enter into force 20 days after the publication. The Member States will then have two years to transpose the legislation into their national law.

The Directive has differentiated dates for transposition concerning certain measures:

- The bans and the marking obligations will have to be implemented two years after the entering into force.
- Tethered caps and lids are to remain attached for all beverage containers up to 3 litres, 5 years after the entry into force of the Directive.
- The additional obligations for extended responsibility of producers will have to be implemented between January 2023 and 31 December 2024, depending on the product.¹⁸⁸

On 31 May 2021 the EU Commission adopted [Commission guidelines on single-use plastic products in accordance with Directive \(EU\) 2019/904](#). It provides further guidance on the interpretation and implementation of the SUP Directive, including definition of terms and it provides examples of products to be considered as falling within or outside its scope.

12.2

The European Green Deal

In December 2019 the European Commission published a communication called The European Green Deal.¹⁸⁹ It is described as resetting “the Commission’s commitment to tackling climate and environmental-related challenges that is this generation’s defining task.”¹⁹⁰ It presents an initial

¹⁸⁷ European Commission - [Press release Circular Economy: Commission welcomes Council final adoption of new rules on single-use plastics to reduce marine plastic litter](#), 21 May 2019

¹⁸⁸ European Commission - [Press release Circular Economy: Commission welcomes Council final adoption of new rules on single-use plastics to reduce marine plastic litter](#), 21 May 2019

¹⁸⁹ European Commission website, [A European Green Deal](#) (accessed 18 March 2024)

¹⁹⁰ European Commission, Communication from the Commission, [The European Green Deal](#), COM(2019) 640 final, 11 December 2019

roadmap of the key policies and measures needed to achieve different policies and goals. Among other things, a new circular economy action plan would be produced to include further action on plastics.¹⁹¹

The European Commission's [Circular Economy Action Plan](#) (CEAP) was published in March 2020. Among other things it seeks to ensure that "all packaging on the EU market is reusable or recyclable in an economically viable way by 2030". The CEAP proposes the following policies in relation to plastic waste:

To increase uptake of recycled plastics and contribute to the more sustainable use of plastics, the Commission will propose mandatory requirements for recycled content and waste reduction measures for key products such as packaging, construction materials and vehicles, also taking into account the activities of the Circular Plastics Alliance.

In addition to measures to reduce plastic litter, the Commission will address the presence of microplastics in the environment by:

- restricting intentionally added microplastics and tackling pellets taking into account the opinion of the European Chemicals Agency;
- developing labelling, standardisation, certification and regulatory measures on unintentional release of microplastics, including measures to increase the capture of microplastics at all relevant stages of products' lifecycle;
- further developing and harmonising methods for measuring unintentionally released microplastics, especially from tyres and textiles, and delivering harmonised data on microplastics concentrations in seawater;
- closing the gaps on scientific knowledge related to the risk and occurrence of microplastics in the environment, drinking water and foods.

Furthermore, the Commission will address emerging sustainability challenges by developing a policy framework on:

- sourcing, labelling and use of bio-based plastics, based on assessing where the use of bio-based feedstock results in genuine environmental benefits, going beyond reduction in using fossil resources;
- use of biodegradable or compostable plastics, based on an assessment of the applications where such use can be beneficial to the environment, and of the criteria for such applications. It will aim to ensure that labelling a product as 'biodegradable' or 'compostable' does not mislead consumers to dispose of it in a way that causes plastic littering or pollution due to unsuitable environmental conditions or insufficient time for degradation.¹⁹²

¹⁹¹ European Commission, Communication from the Commission, [The European Green Deal](#), COM(2019) 640 final, 11 December 2019

¹⁹² European Commission [Circular Economy Action Plan](#), 11 March 2020, p12-13

Further information about CEAP actions and initiatives and about its monitoring programme are available from the European Commission webpage, [Circular economy action plan](#).

Revision of the Packaging and Packaging Waste Directive

As part of its European Green Deal work, on 30 November 2022, the Commission proposed to revise the Packaging and Packaging Waste Directive. This revision aims to:

- prevent the generation of packaging waste, reducing it in quantity, and promoting reuse and refill
- ensure that all packaging on the EU market will be recyclable in an economically viable way by 2030
- increase the use of recycled plastics in packaging, thus enabling more high quality (“closed loop”) recycling and substituting virgin materials¹⁹³

This would be achieved, in part, through target setting. The proposed headline target is to reduce packaging waste by 15% by 2040 per Member State per capita, compared to 2018. This is anticipated to lead to an overall waste reduction in the EU of some 37% compared to a scenario without changing the legislation. The target is expected to be met through increased reuse and recycling.¹⁹⁴

Other measures aim to make packaging fully recyclable by 2030. This includes setting design criteria for packaging; creating mandatory deposit return systems for plastic bottles and aluminium cans; and making it clear which types of packaging are compostable. There will also be mandatory amounts of recycled content that producers have to include in new plastic packaging.¹⁹⁵

Plastic pellets: proposed regulation

Plastic pellets are the raw material used for producing plastics, also referred to as nurdles, nibs and resin pellets. They are typically 2-5 mm in diameter. There is concern that during manufacture and transportation, some of those pellets can be spilled or leak, where they can cause damage to the environment.¹⁹⁶ An article from the website EU Monitor sets out the scale of pellet production and losses :

¹⁹³ European Commission, [Packaging waste](#) (accessed 18 March 2024)

¹⁹⁴ European Commission, [European Green Deal: Putting an end to wasteful packaging, boosting reuse and recycling](#), 30 November 2022

¹⁹⁵ European Commission, [European Green Deal: Putting an end to wasteful packaging, boosting reuse and recycling](#), 30 November 2022

¹⁹⁶ European Commission, [Questions and Answers on Measures to reduce microplastic pollution from plastic pellets](#), 16 October 2023

High volumes of pellets are produced and handled every year, both globally and in the EU (around 57 million tons in the EU in 2021). Estimates show that between 52 140 tonnes and 184 290 tonnes of pellets were lost to the environment in the EU in 2019. This is equivalent to between 2100 and 7300 trucks full of pellets per year.¹⁹⁷

As part of its European Green Deal work, the Commission has published a [Proposal for a Regulation on preventing pellet losses to reduce microplastic pollution](#), 16 October 2023.

The proposed regulation would introduce requirements on the handling of plastic pellets along the entire supply chain from production to distribution to final waste management. This would include needing a risk assessment plan identifying potential for spills and losses and having procedures in place to prevent, contain and clean up pellet losses. It would also require the registration of installations handling plastic pellets and of carriers transporting, to ensure better traceability of pellets enforcement of the rules.¹⁹⁸

¹⁹⁷ EU Monitor, [Explanatory Memorandum to COM\(2023\)645 - Preventing plastic pellet losses to reduce microplastic pollution](#), 16 October 2023

¹⁹⁸ European Commission, [Proposal for a Regulation on preventing pellet losses to reduce microplastic pollution](#), 16 October 2023

13

Other plastics issues

The sections below set out some key plastic waste issues that have featured in the news or been raised by stakeholders. This includes issues to do with the export of waste and whether there should be standards and terminology relating to biodegradable, compostable and bio-based plastics.

13.1

Export of plastic waste requirements

The UK has various obligations under international and national law relating to the shipment of waste abroad, particularly under the UN [Basel Convention on the Control of Transboundary Movements of Hazardous Waste and their Disposal](#) (the Basel Convention) and the relevant regulations.¹⁹⁹ The Basel Convention has been amended to require that, from 1 January 2021, a Prior Informed Consent procedure is used for the shipment of certain types of plastic waste.²⁰⁰ These amended rules apply across the UK.²⁰¹

The UK Government also has a 2019 Manifesto commitment to “ban” the export of plastic waste to non-OECD (The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) countries.²⁰² Provision for this has been included in section 62 of the [Environment Act 2021](#). It would be applicable across the UK.²⁰³ The government has said that it will undertake further consultation before bringing the provisions into force, which has not yet been published.²⁰⁴

Separately, the EU banned most plastic waste exports to non-OECD countries, from 1 January 2021.²⁰⁵ As this occurred after the UK left the EU, these rules do not apply to Great Britain. The UK Government has been criticised for not following it, but has emphasised that it is following all current rules and said that its own proposed ban, when implemented, would go further than the EU’s.²⁰⁶

The sections below set out these developments in more detail.

¹⁹⁹ Basel Convention website, [Overview](#) (accessed on 18 March 2024)

²⁰⁰ UN Basel Convention, [Questions and answers related to the Basel Convention Plastic Waste Amendments](#) (accessed on 18 March 2024)

²⁰¹ Defra in the Media, [Defra responds to coverage on plastic waste exports](#), 22 January 2021

²⁰² [Conservative Party Election Manifesto](#), November 2019, p43

²⁰³ [Environment Bill 2019-21](#) Explanatory notes, Annex A on clause 59

²⁰⁴ [Plastics: Waste, UIN 202759](#), tabled on 16 October 2023

²⁰⁵ European Commission, [Plastic waste shipments: new EU rules on importing and exporting plastic waste](#), 22 December 2020

²⁰⁶ Defra in the Media, [Defra responds to coverage on plastic waste exports](#), 22 January 2021

Basel Convention and amendment

The UK is a Party to the Basel Convention, which was adopted on 22 March 1989 by the Conference of Plenipotentiaries in Basel, Switzerland. The provisions of the Convention centre around the following principal aims:

- the reduction of hazardous waste generation and the promotion of environmentally sound management of hazardous wastes, wherever the place of disposal;
- the restriction of transboundary movements of hazardous wastes except where it is perceived to be in accordance with the principles of environmentally sound management; and
- a regulatory system applying to cases where transboundary movements are permissible.²⁰⁷

The requirements of the Basel Convention have been implemented in UK law by the [Transfrontier Shipment of Waste Regulations 2007](#) (SI no.1711). In May 2019 at the [fourteenth meeting of the Conference of the Parties to the Basel Convention](#) (BC COP-14), 186 countries, including the UK, agreed to make legally binding amendments to the Basel Convention with the aim of making the global trade in plastic waste more transparent and better regulated.²⁰⁸ It followed concern that large quantities of contaminated and mixed plastic wastes were being “dumped” in developing countries.²⁰⁹ The amendments came into effect from 1 January 2021.

The amendments mean that certain categories of plastic waste are now subject to the Convention’s Prior informed Consent (PIC) procedure.²¹⁰ The PIC procedure means that both the exporter country and the destination country must both permit the shipment of these categories of waste, by pre-notification approval, in order for them to be exported.

An [FAQs page on the amendments on the Basel Convention website](#) states that, “The amendments as such do not imply a ban on the import, transit or export of plastic waste but rather a clarification of when and how the Convention applies to such waste.”²¹¹

For further information about plastic waste export rules see:

- GOV.UK guidance, [Waste: import and export](#): The controls that apply if you ship waste into or out of Great Britain (GB), updated 12 March 2021;

²⁰⁷ Basel Convention website, [Overview](#) (accessed on 18 March 2024)

²⁰⁸ United Nations Environment press release, [Governments agree landmark decisions to protect people and planet from hazardous chemicals and waste, including plastic waste](#), 12 May 2019

²⁰⁹ “Plastic dumping law adds to exporter uncertainty” [FNDSReport](#), 13 May 2019 [subscription required]

²¹⁰ UN Basel Convention, [Questions and answers related to the Basel Convention Plastic Waste Amendments](#) (accessed on 18 March 2024)

²¹¹ UN Basel Convention, [Questions and answers related to the Basel Convention Plastic Waste Amendments](#) (accessed on 18 March 2024)

- GOV.UK guidance, [Importing and exporting waste plastic](#), updated 31 December 2020
- NI Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, [Brexit - environment waste questions & answers](#);
- Scottish Environment Protection Agency, [International waste shipments guidance on the Basel Convention Amendments on plastic waste](#), December 2020
- Natural Resources Wales, [Guidance on importing and exporting waste](#).

UK Government proposed “ban” of export of plastic waste to non-OECD countries

The [Environment Act 2021](#) inserted new provision in section 141 of the [Environmental Protection Act 1990](#) to allow the Secretary of State to make regulations, which can include provisions prohibiting or restricting:

- (a) the importation of waste;
- (b) the landing and unloading of waste in the United Kingdom;
- (c) the exportation of waste;
- (d) the loading of waste for exportation;
- (e) the transit of waste for export.²¹²

This section extends to and applies across the UK. In a January 2020 written ministerial statement accompanying publication of the then Environment Bill, the government said that it also intended to use this regulation-making power to “ban” the export of plastic waste to non-OECD countries and would consult with industry, NGOs, and local councils on the date by which this should be achieved.²¹³ No further consultation on this issue has yet been published.

The proposed ban was a direct commitment in the Conservative Party Manifesto for the 2019 general election.²¹⁴

Reaction from the waste industry on the proposed ban has been mixed. The Recycling Association has expressed concern that the ban could harm legitimate operators and says it would rather see better enforcement of existing regulations. The Environmental Services Association welcomed the ban but wanted to see more investment in UK based recycling.²¹⁵

²¹² Clause 59(3) Environment Bill 2019-20

²¹³ The Environment Bill: [Written statement - HCWS80](#), 30 January 2020

²¹⁴ [Conservative Party Election Manifesto](#), November 2019, p43

²¹⁵ “Industry welcomes ‘most of Environment Bill’” [LetsRecycle.com](#), 30 January 2020

Amendment to EU rules on export of plastic waste to non-OECD countries

From 1 January 2021 the EU has banned the export of plastic waste from the EU to non-OECD countries, except for clean plastic waste sent for recycling.

The rules are contained in [Commission Delegated Regulation \(EU\) 2020/2174 of 19 October 2020 on shipments of waste](#).

Exporting plastic waste from the EU to OECD countries and importing to the EU will also be more strictly controlled. For further information see European Commission announcement, [Plastic waste shipments: new EU rules on importing and exporting plastic waste](#), 22 December 2020. It summarises the amended rules on exports as follows:

- Exporting hazardous plastic waste and plastic waste that is hard to recycle from the EU to non-OECD countries will be banned.
- Exporting clean, non-hazardous waste (which is destined for recycling) from the EU to non-OECD countries will only be authorised under specific conditions. The importing country must indicate which rules apply to such imports to the European Commission. The export from the EU will then only be allowed under the conditions laid down by the importing country. For countries which do not provide information on their legal regime, the “prior notification and consent procedure” will apply.
- Exporting hazardous plastic waste and plastic waste that is hard to recycle from the EU to OECD countries will be subject to the “prior notification and consent procedure”. Under this procedure, both the importing and exporting country must authorise the shipment.²¹⁶

In November 2023 political agreement was reached between the European Parliament and the Council on waste shipments, which will amend the rules further to prohibit the export of plastic waste from the EU to non-OECD countries. After five years, countries who then wish to import EU plastic waste can request the EU Commission lifts the ban for them if they can prove that they can deal with it in a sustainable manner.²¹⁷

The European Parliament and the Council will now have to formally adopt the regulation in line with the political agreement reached for these changes to come into force.

²¹⁶ European Commission, [Plastic waste shipments: new EU rules on importing and exporting plastic waste](#), 22 December 2020

²¹⁷ European Commission, [Commission welcomes political agreement on stronger control of exports of waste](#), 17 November 2023

13.2

Terminology and standards: bioplastics, biodegradable and compostable plastic

The problem with standards and terminology

In September 2020 WRAP published a guide, [Understanding plastic packaging and the language we use to describe it](#). The guide sets out that terminology which reflects what plastic is made from, does not necessarily reflect how it can be disposed of at the end of its life. It stated, for example, that use of the term “bio-plastic” does not automatically mean that a product will biodegrade:

Plastic can be made from fossil-based or bio-based materials. Both can be used to make highly durable, nonbiodegradable plastics, or plastics which either biodegrade or compost. The nature of the material used to make a plastic or the term used to describe it does not necessarily dictate the way it will behave at the end of its life e.g. a bio-based plastic or bioplastic does not automatically mean it will biodegrade.²¹⁸

It also made clear that the fact that a plastic is described as “biodegradable” does not mean that it should be freely released into the environment in an uncontrolled manner. The speed, method and nature of biodegradation differs between materials. Currently biodegradable plastic cannot be recycled in the same way as non-biodegradable plastic. It must be separated from nonbiodegradable plastic streams and dealt with separately. If not, it causes problems during the recycling process.²¹⁹

In terms of the environmental impact of biodegradable and compostable packaging, the WRAP guide stated:

There is a lack of clarity concerning standards that define the biodegradability of biodegradable or compostable plastics in any environment. There is a particular lack of evidence on the behaviour of these materials in water, and there is a need to understand biodegradation at lower temperatures. Therefore, it is very difficult to accurately assess environmental impact of biodegradable and compostable plastic packaging.²²⁰

In its December 2018 Resources and Waste Strategy, the UK Government said that it would launch a call for evidence on the development of standards for bio-based and biodegradable plastics (see below).²²¹

In June 2020 a group of trade associations and Greenpeace called on the government to implement a total ban on oxo-degradable plastics. Oxo-

²¹⁸ WRAP, [Understanding plastic packaging and the language we use to describe it](#), September 2020, p2

²¹⁹ WRAP, [Understanding plastic packaging and the language we use to describe it](#), September 2020, p5

²²⁰ WRAP, [Understanding plastic packaging and the language we use to describe it](#), September 2020, p7

²²¹ HM Government, [Waste and Resources Strategy for England](#), December 2018, p125

degradable plastics are made from conventional plastics and supplemented with specific additives in order to mimic biodegradation. In an open letter to the Environment Secretary, signatories including the Environmental Services Association (ESA) and environmental organisation Recoup called on the Secretary of State to ban the use, sale and distribution of oxo-degradable plastics in the UK due to concerns that it can form microplastics which build up oceans and in soil.²²²

Government consultation on standards for biodegradable, compostable and bio-based plastics

On 22 July 2019 the UK Government published a [Standards for biodegradable, compostable and bio-based plastics: call for evidence](#). It sought “robust evidence backed by scientific theory, direct practical experience, or analysis, rather than opinion” on:

- a) the overall sustainability of bio-based and biodegradable plastic products in comparison with those made from other materials. This could include all aspects of a product’s life-cycle and will help in assessing whether technical standards or other related options are suitable mechanisms to add value for such products
- b) existing relevant plastic degradation standards and how, or if, they might be promoted without any adverse effects to the environment and disposal routes
- c) the design and implementation of standards for biodegradable plastics to ensure that they fully biodegrade in a reasonable time-frame in specified environments²²³

Alongside it the government also published a [Review of standards for biodegradable plastics: by the Industrial Biotechnology Innovation Centre](#). This review aimed to provide information on the mechanisms of biodegradation, and why not all plastic is biodegradable. The paper stated that “there is a need for further clarification as to what plastics are truly biodegradable, under what conditions.” The review’s conclusions explain that this is a complicated matter, due it being difficult to replicate natural processes that take many years, in a laboratory.²²⁴

In April 2021 the Government published a response and summary of responses to the July 2019 consultation, [Standards for bio-based, biodegradable, and compostable plastics: Government response](#). In relation to oxo-biodegradable plastics, the Government said that it was minded to ban these materials, subject to further consultation:

²²² Joint letter to Rt Hon George Eustice, [Re: oxo degradable/oxo biodegradable/oxo fragmentable plastics](#), 1 June 2020

²²³ HM Government, [Standards for biodegradable, compostable and bio-based plastics: call for evidence landing page](#), 22 July 2019

²²⁴ Industrial Biotechnology Innovation Centre, [Review of standards for biodegradable plastics](#), July 2019, p26-27

On the subject of oxo-degradable and oxo-biodegradable plastics, on the basis of current evidence, including the review on oxo-degradable plastics conducted by our Hazardous Substances Advisory Committee, there is insufficient evidence demonstrating that oxo-degradable/oxo-biodegradable plastics perform as claimed and biodegrade in a reasonable timeframe in the open environment. In the absence of further evidence, we are minded to introduce a ban on these materials, subject to a public consultation. We welcome the leadership on this issue shown by the UK Plastics Pact who have already committed to eliminate the use of oxo-degradable plastic.²²⁵

No further consultation has yet been published.

²²⁵ HM Government, [Standards for bio-based, biodegradable, and compostable plastics: Government response](#), April 2021, p17-18

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What are other countries doing to tackle plastic waste?

There are several reports and articles which set out what other countries are doing to reduce the volume of avoidable plastic waste. For example, see:

- CMS Legal, [CMS Expert Guide to plastics and packaging laws](#), February 2024.
- Verive, [What are countries outside of Europe doing to reduce plastic waste?](#), 5 January 2024.
- International Tax Review, [Plastic taxes: a guide to new legislation in Europe](#), 15 February 2023.
- Ellen MacArthur Foundation, [Global Commitment: Government insights 2023](#) (PDF), 2023.
- Back to Blue Initiative, [Plastic Management Index](#) (accessed 18 March 2024).
- OECD, [Environment Ministers' commitments on plastics](#) (PDF), June 2022.
- OECD, [Global Plastics Outlook](#), February 2022.
- European Parliament, Policy Department for Citizens' Rights and Constitutional Affairs Directorate-General for Internal Policies, [The environmental impacts of plastics and micro-plastics use, waste and pollution: EU and national measures](#), October 2020.
- European Environment Agency, [Preventing Plastic Waste in Europe](#), EEA Report No 2/2019, 3 June 2019.
- UN Environment Programme, [Single-Use Plastics: A Roadmap for Sustainability](#), 2018.
- Annex D of the February 2018 Voluntary & Economics Incentives Working Group Report, [Voluntary and economic incentives to reduce littering of drinks containers and promote recycling](#), contains a table summarising details of other countries with a deposit return scheme and their reported rates of packaging recycling.

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