



Plastic Pollution and Recycling Debate on 19 December 2018

Summary

This House of Lords Library briefing has been prepared in advance of the debate due to take place on 19 December 2018 in the House of Lords on the motion moved by Baroness Neville-Rolfe (Conservative), “that this House takes note of the threat of plastic to the environment and the case for improved recycling”.

Plastic production has increased substantially over the past 50 years. If improperly managed, plastic waste can leak into the environment and pollute the oceans, posing a threat to marine wildlife and ocean ecosystems. Plastic production also requires the use of non-renewable resources, depleting natural resources and contributing to greenhouse gas emissions.

The UK has a number of policies in place to promote plastic recycling and limit environmental damage. The overarching framework of such policies is set by EU Directive 2008/98/EC on waste (Waste Framework Directive), which requires member states to have waste management policies in place and sets targets for recycling. In England, local authorities are responsible for household waste. In fulfilment of the EU Packaging and Waste Directive, the UK also places obligations on producers to ensure that a specified proportion of their plastic packaging is recycled. Packaging waste is also subject to separate EU targets; the UK is currently on course to meet the targets for 2025.

The concept of the “circular economy” has been central in the development of recent thinking on recycling policies. The aim of this approach is to extract the maximum value from existing resources. Current UK recycling policy has been criticised for focusing on the collection of materials but failing to develop the domestic reprocessing industry or pursue policies that aim to increase demand for recycled materials.

The Government is expected to publish a new Resource and Waste Strategy before the end of 2018, but several policies which are expected to be included have already been announced. These include:

- A commitment to work towards eliminating avoidable waste by 2050 and all avoidable plastic waste by 2042.
- Reform of the packaging producer responsibility scheme.
- The introduction of a deposit return scheme.
- A new tax on plastic packaging that does not contain at least 30 percent recycled content.

Table of Contents

1. Threat to the Environment Posed by Plastic
2. Recycling Policy in the UK
3. Case for Improved Plastic Recycling
4. UK Government Proposals
5. Further Information

Table of Contents

1. Threat to the Environment Posed by Plastic	1
2. Recycling Policy in the UK	2
2.1 EU Waste Directive	2
2.2 EU Packaging Directive.....	4
3. Case for Improved Plastic Recycling	6
3.1 Circular Economy	6
3.2 Criticisms of Current Policy.....	8
4. UK Government Proposals	11
5. Further Information	16

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I. Threat to the Environment Posed by Plastic

Plastics production has increased dramatically over the last 50 years. A 2017 study estimated that globally, 8.3 billion tonnes of plastic has been produced to date, of which 9% has been recycled, 12% incinerated and 79% has accumulated in landfill or the environment.¹ If improperly managed, waste plastics can pollute the natural environment, a problem summarised by the European Commission:

Very large quantities of plastic waste leak into the environment from sources both on land and at sea, generating significant economic and environmental damage. Globally, 5 to 13 million tonnes of plastics—1.5 to 4% of global plastics production—end up in the oceans every year. It is estimated that plastic accounts for over 80% of marine litter. Plastic debris is then transported by marine currents, sometimes over very long distances. It can be washed up on land, degrade into microplastics or form dense areas of marine litter trapped in ocean gyres.²

A report by the World Economic Forum (WEF) estimated that by 2050 there could be more plastic than fish in the ocean by weight.³

The United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) 2014 Yearbook identified five types of environmental damage caused by plastic debris in the world's oceans:

- Mortality or sub-lethal effects when plastic is ingested by animals such as turtles, small-toothed whales and seabirds.
- Entanglement of animals such as dolphins and large whales in nylon fishing gear (like nets) and other plastic debris.
- Damage to critical ecosystems such as coral reefs and smothering of sediments.
- Chemical contamination of marine organisms through ingestion of small plastic particles.
- Potential changes in biodiversity due to the transport of invasive species on plastic fragments.⁴

A review of academic literature found that “[a]ll known species of sea turtle, 54% of all species of marine mammal, and 56% of all species of seabird were

¹ Richard Geyer, Jenna R Jambeck and Kara Lavender Law, ‘[Production, Use, and Fate of All Plastics Ever Made](#)’ *Science Advances*, 19 July 2017, vol 3 no 7, p e1700782.

² European Commission, [A European Strategy for Plastics in a Circular Economy](#), 16 January 2018, p 3.

³ World Economic Forum, [The New Plastics Economy: Rethinking the Future of Plastics](#), January 2016, p 14.

⁴ United Nations Environment Programme, [UNEP Yearbook: Emerging Issues in our Global Environment 2014](#), p 49.

affected by entanglement in or ingestion of marine debris”.⁵ Of these species, 17% were listed as near threatened, vulnerable, endangered or critically endangered. In 92% of cases of reported entanglement or ingestion the debris responsible was plastic.⁶

More recently, concerns have been raised about the possible effects of plastic pollution on human health. A literature review by academics at the University of Newcastle found evidence that “[t]he uptake of plastic particles by humans can occur through the consumption of terrestrial and aquatic food products, drinking water and inhalation”.⁷ It noted that the implications of ingestion of microplastics on human health were still unknown, and that further research was required to identify its potential impact.

Plastic production also requires the use of non-renewable resources. The World Economic Forum estimated that roughly 6% of oil production is used to make plastics. It projected that “[i]f the current strong growth of plastics usage continues as expected, the consumption of oil by the entire plastics sector will account for 20% of the total consumption by 2050”. According to the report, on the current path the plastics industry would also account for 15% of the global carbon budget by 2050.⁸

2. Recycling Policy in the UK

Waste management is a devolved matter and so each devolved administration is responsible for its own recycling policy. Nonetheless, the general approach and regulatory framework for waste management is set by a series of EU directives.⁹

2.1 EU Waste Directive

The EU Waste Framework Directive’s overarching framework is a waste management hierarchy. Member states are required to develop policy and legislation that pursues these approaches in the following order of priority:¹⁰

1. Prevention

measures taken before a substance, material or product has become waste, that reduce:

⁵ S C Gall and R C Thompson, ‘[The Impact of Debris on Marine life](#)’, *Marine Pollution Bulletin*, vol 92 no 1–2, pp 170–9.

⁶ *ibid.*

⁷ Maddison Carbery et al, ‘Trophic Transfer of Microplastics and Mixed Contaminants in the Marine Food Web and Implications for Human Health’, *Environment International*, June 2018, vol 115, pp 400–9.

⁸ World Economic Forum, [The New Plastics Economy: Rethinking the Future of Plastics](#), January 2016, p 13.

⁹ House of Commons Library, [Household Recycling in the UK](#), 12 September 2018, p 9.

¹⁰ [Directive 2008/98/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council](#), articles 3 and 4.

- (a) the quantity of waste, including through the re-use of products or the extension of the life span of products;
- (b) the adverse impacts of the generated waste on the environment and human health; or
- (c) the content of harmful substances in materials and products.

2. Re-use

any operation by which products or components that are not waste are used again for the same purpose for which they were conceived;

3. Recycling

any recovery operation by which waste materials are reprocessed into products, materials or substances whether for the original or other purposes. It includes the reprocessing of organic material but does not include energy recovery and the reprocessing into materials that are to be used as fuels or for backfilling operations;

4. Other recovery

any operation the principal result of which is waste serving a useful purpose by replacing other materials which would otherwise have been used to fulfil a particular function, or waste being prepared to fulfil that function, in the plant or in the wider economy;

5. Disposal

any operation which is not recovery even where the operation has as a secondary consequence the reclamation of substances or energy.

Household Waste

The directive also requires member states to recycle or re-use at least 50 percent of household waste by 2020. The Environmental Protection Act 1990 (as amended) places a legal duty on waste collection authorities to collect household, commercial and industrial waste in their area. A House of Commons Library briefing explains the requirements for collection systems:

From 1 January 2015, the Waste (England and Wales) (Amendment) Regulations 2012 have required public and private waste collectors to set up separate collections of waste for paper, plastic, metal and glass where necessary to ensure recovery operations and where technically, environmentally and economically practicable (TEEP). The Explanatory Memorandum to the Regulations confirms that “where such collection is not so necessary or not so practicable the duties relating to separate collection do not apply, and collection may accordingly be by other means”. This means that, in practice, collections of mixed types of

recycled waste may still exist but they are not viewed as a form of separate collection.¹¹

As local authorities are responsible for assessing their own recycling requirements, collection provisions vary. In response to a written question on plastic recycling the Government stated that:

Councils will come to different decisions about which materials they collect for recycling, depending on local factors and the ability to sell these materials on to recycling companies.¹²

In 2017/18, 99 percent of local authorities collected plastic bottles for recycling, but only 77 percent collected rigid mixed plastics.¹³

2.2 EU Packaging Directive

In order to fulfil the requirements set out in the [EU Directive on Packaging and Waste](#), UK legislation places certain obligations on producers to ensure that a proportion of their packaging is recycled as part of the packaging producer responsibility scheme:

The packaging regulations require companies that handle packaging (and that meet certain thresholds) to demonstrate that a certain amount of packaging has been recycled. They do this by obtaining recovery evidence notes from UK reprocessing plants or from companies exporting waste for recycling abroad. Obligations apply across the supply chain, covering companies that make or sell packaged goods (such as supermarkets) as well as manufacturers of packaging. In 2017, 7,002 companies registered as having packaging obligations across the UK.¹⁴

The EU has also set targets for packaging recycling rates in member states. Table I sets out the EU plastic packaging recycling targets, and the annual national targets. The UK Government has committed to meeting or exceeding these targets after the UK has left the EU.¹⁵

¹¹ House of Commons Library, [Household Recycling in the UK](#), 12 September 2018, p 12.

¹² House of Lords, [‘Written Question: Plastics: Recycling’](#), 31 October 2018, HL10930.

¹³ *ibid.*

¹⁴ National Audit Office, [The Packaging Recycling Obligations](#), 23 July 2018, p 6.

¹⁵ *ibid.*, p 23.

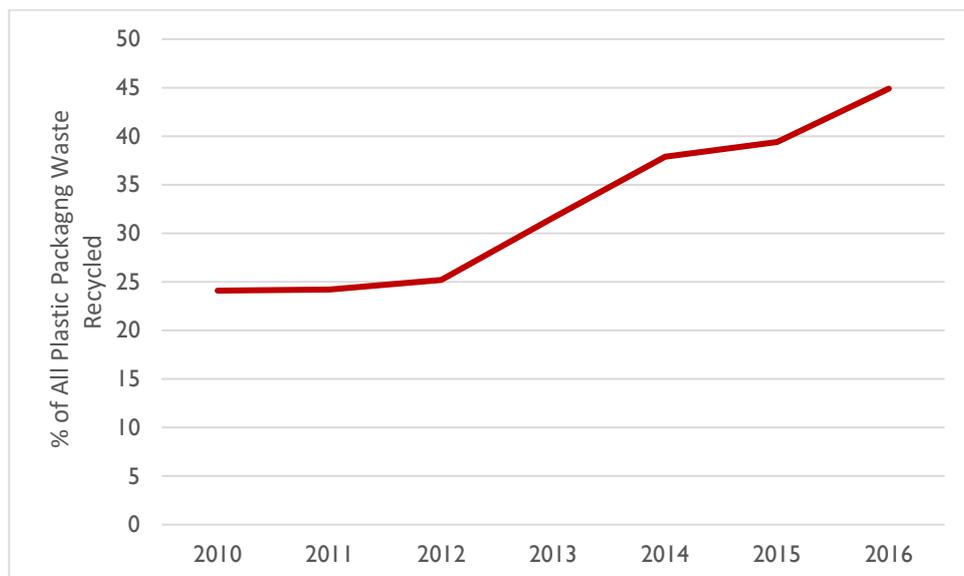
Table 1: Recycling Targets for Plastic Packaging Waste

Year	Target (%)
National Targets	
2018	44.0
2019	45.7
2020	47.3
2021	47.8
2022	48.4
2023	48.9
2024	49.5
EU Targets	
2025	50
2030	55

(Source: WRAP, [PlasticFlow 2025: Plastic Packaging and Flow Data Report](#), August 2018, p 10; and European Commission, '[Circular Economy: New Rules Will Make EU the Global Front-Runner in Waste Management and Recycling](#)', 22 May 2018)

Plastic Packaging Recycling Rate

The plastic packaging recycling rate has increased significantly since 2010, as demonstrated by Graph 1.

Graph 1: UK Plastic Packaging Recycling Rate 2010–2016

(Source: Eurostat, '[Recycling Rate of Packaging Waste by Type of Packaging](#)', accessed 6 November 2018)

However, the National Audit Office's (NAO) 2018 report, *The Packaging Recycling Obligations*, questioned the robustness of the UK Government's official figures on plastic packaging:

Government figures assume that collections from the commercial sector increased by 150% between 2012 and 2016, but the Department [for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs] has no reliable data to check whether commercial waste collections have in fact increased so quickly. The financial incentive for companies to fraudulently claim they have recycled plastic packaging is higher than for any other material, with recovery notes representing around 60% of the price of waste plastic bottles over the first six months of 2018.¹⁶

Nonetheless, the report noted that despite potential inaccuracies, they were unlikely to undermine the achievement of the plastic packaging recycling targets.¹⁷

The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs asked the Waste and Resource Action Programme (WRAP), the sustainable resource charity, to carry out a review into accuracy of the plastic packaging recycling rate. Its plastic packaging flow data report published in August 2018 reported that the 2017 plastic packaging recycling rate was between 43 and 47%. The report concluded that the UK was likely to meet its 2018, 2019 and 2020 targets.¹⁸

Brexit

The European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018 will retain any EU law on waste and recycling, including recycling targets in UK law. EU institutions will no longer monitor the UK's compliance, but the Government has proposed a new statutory independent body to oversee environmental obligations which it proposed to legislate for in the forthcoming Environmental Principles and Governance Bill.¹⁹

3. Case for Improved Plastic Recycling

3.1 Circular Economy

A central concept in the development of policies to promote sustainable plastic is the circular economy. The UK's Waste and Resources Action Programme (WRAP) gives the following definition:

A circular economy is an alternative to a traditional linear economy

¹⁶ National Audit Office, [The Packaging Recycling Obligations](#), 23 July 2018, p 7.

¹⁷ *ibid.*

¹⁸ WRAP, [PlasticFlow 2025: Plastic Packaging and Flow Data Report](#), August 2018, p 12.

¹⁹ House of Commons Library, [Household Recycling in the UK](#), 12 September 2018, p 5.

(make, use, dispose) in which we keep resources in use for as long as possible, extract the maximum value from them whilst in use, then recover and regenerate products and materials at the end of each service life.²⁰

As well as environmental benefits, it has been argued that developing the circular economy could also have economic benefits. A report produced by Green Alliance, the independent environment think tank, and WRAP projected that on the current path, the circular economy could create 200,000 jobs and reduce unemployment by 54,000. It then goes on to suggest that “a more rapid development of circular economy activity could create around half a million jobs (gross) and reduce unemployment by around 102,000”.²¹

Figure 1: The Circular Economy



(Source: WRAP, '[WRAP and the Circular Economy](#)', accessed 5 November 2018)

²⁰ WRAP, '[WRAP and the Circular Economy](#)', accessed 5 November 2018.

²¹ Green Alliance and WRAP, '[Employment and the Circular Economy: Job Creation in a More Resource Efficient Britain](#)', 2015, p 3.

European Strategy for Plastics in the Circular Economy

In January 2018, the European Commission adopted *A European Strategy for Plastics in the Circular Economy*. It sets out the improvements that would need to be made to achieve higher levels of plastic recycling:

Higher levels of plastic recycling, comparable with those of other materials, will only be achieved by improving the way plastics and plastics articles are produced and designed. It will also require increased cooperation across the value chain: from industry, plastics manufacturers and converters to public and private waste management companies. Specifically, key players should work together to:

- improve design and support innovation to make plastics and plastic products easier to recycle;
- expand and improve the separate collection of plastic waste, to ensure quality inputs to the recycling industry;
- expand and modernise the EU's sorting and recycling capacity; and
- create viable markets for recycled and renewable plastics.²²

A detailed list of the future EU measures proposed to implement the strategy can be found in the [annexes of the report](#).

3.2 Criticisms of Current Policy

A 2018 report by Green Alliance argued that current UK recycling policy focuses too much on the collection of materials for recycling but does not adequately address the recovery of those materials:

British resource strategy is over reliant on a single policy: recycling targets, which are used to 'push' materials into the collection system. The result is that councils and waste management companies collect resources for which, as yet, there is no market. To date, private companies have not built sufficient domestic infrastructure to reprocess it economically. This is bad for the environment and it is also bad for the economy. Businesses want to use recycled content but the UK is exporting valuable materials that could instead be supporting clean jobs, building resilience and enhancing competitiveness.²³

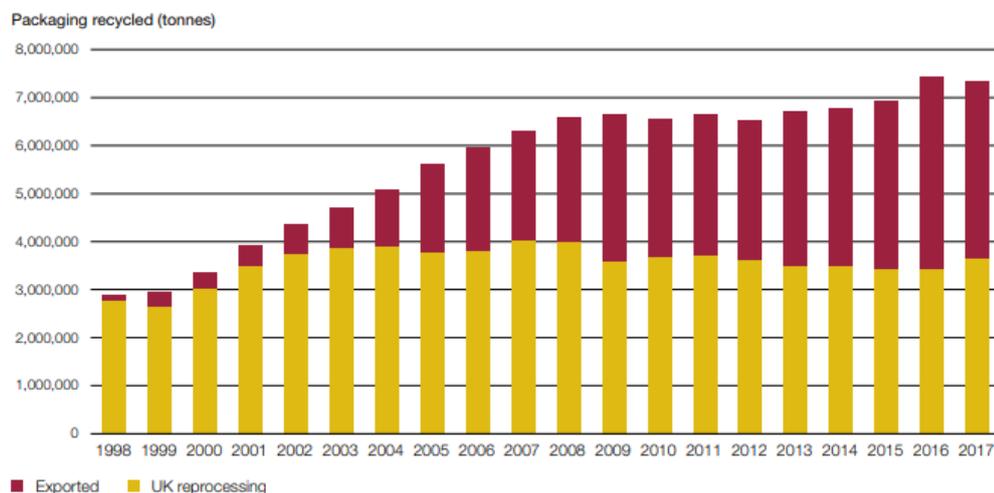
Several organisations have criticised UK recycling policy for its reliance on waste exports. According to the NAO, exports of packaging waste have increased sixfold since 2002, and in 2017, more packaging waste was

²² European Commission, [A European Strategy for Plastics in a Circular Economy](#), 16 January 2018, p 6.

²³ Green Alliance, [Completing the Circle: Creating Effective UK Markets for Recovered Resources](#), June 2018, p 2.

exported than reprocessed domestically.²⁴ Figure 2 shows that whilst the tonnage of plastic packaging waste exported has increased considerably since 1998, the amount reprocessed in the UK has remained constant.

Figure 2: Reported Weight of UK Packaging Recycled, by Location of Processing (UK or Abroad), 1998 to 2017



Source: National packaging waste database

(Source: National Audit Office, [The Packaging Recycling Obligations](#), 23 July 2018, p 22)

Until recently, China was the UK’s largest export market for packaging. However, in January 2018, the Chinese authorities banned imports of a number of waste materials citing concern about contamination.²⁵ The NAO warned that the ban “could lead to a dip or decline in recycling performance”.²⁶

In its 2017 report, *Plastic Bottles: Turning Back the Plastic Tide*, the House of Commons Environmental Audit Committee (EAC) criticised the level of investment in exporting waste compared to domestic reprocessing:

Evidence from the regulatory body of the producer responsibility scheme, the Environment Agency, revealed that almost twice as much money is invested in funding collection for plastic waste to be exported abroad than for plastic waste to be reprocessed domestically. Furthermore, over £7 million was invested in “reduction in price and developing end markets” for exported plastic waste, whereas just over £1 million was invested in the same areas for domestic reprocessing of plastic waste. This demonstrates that the current incentive to export packaging waste, diverts funding from the

²⁴ National Audit Office, [The Packaging Recycling Obligations](#), 23 July 2018, p 7.

²⁵ *ibid.*

²⁶ *ibid.*

UK plastics reprocessing market.²⁷

The EAC called the distribution of funding “grossly inefficient”.²⁸

A briefing by the Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology summarised the difficulties facing UK reprocessors in attracting investment:

First, they face problems in ensuring a consistent supply and quality of recyclate, because of variation in recycling systems across England and the volumes of recyclate being exported. Secondly, there is a ‘chicken and egg’ problem: for a consistent supply to develop there must be a demand, but demand will not develop without a consistent supply.²⁹

Green Alliance argued that the lack of development of the UK reprocessing industry means missed economic opportunities. It claims that “[i]mproving domestic reprocessing will support the industrial strategy” and create jobs.³⁰ Moreover, developing the secondary market could satisfy 71 percent of UK plastic demand, and recommended three types of pull measures that could be introduced:

1. Recycled content targets.
2. Short term support for plastic recyclers.
3. A market stabilisation fund.³¹

The EAC also argued that the financial burden of packaging waste should be shifted from taxpayers to producers.³² The NAO review of packaging recycling obligations notes that the “costs to business are low compared with schemes in other countries because UK taxpayers pay most of the costs of collecting packaging waste”.³³ The EAC recommended that the Government reform the producer responsibility scheme and “adapt a producer responsibility compliance fee structure that stimulates the use of recycled plastic, rewards design for recyclability, and increases costs for packaging that is difficult to recycle or reuse”.³⁴

²⁷ House of Commons Environmental Audit Committee, [Plastic Bottles: Turning Back the Plastic Tide](#), 22 December 2017, HC 339 of session 2017–19, p 19.

²⁸ *ibid*

²⁹ Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology, [Maximising the Value of Recycled Materials](#), 16 January 2018.

³⁰ Green Alliance, [Completing the Circle: Creating Effective UK Markets for Recovered Resources](#), June 2018, p 9.

³¹ For more details see: Green Alliance, [Completing the Circle: Creating Effective UK Markets for Recovered Resources](#), June 2018, p 12.

³² House of Commons Environmental Audit Committee, [Plastic Bottles: Turning Back the Plastic Tide](#), 22 December 2017, HC 339 of session 2017–19, pp 19–20.

³³ National Audit Office, [The Packaging Recycling Obligations](#), 23 July 2018, p 7.

³⁴ House of Commons Environmental Audit Committee, [Plastic Bottles: Turning Back the Plastic Tide](#), 22 December 2017, HC 339 of session 2017–19, pp 19–20.

4. UK Government Proposals

The Government is expected to publish a new resource and waste strategy for England before the end of 2018.³⁵ It has made several announcements and commitments earlier this year that are expected to be included.

25 Year Environment Plan

In January 2018, the Government published *A Green Future: Our 25 Year Plan to Improve the Environment*. In it, the Government committed to:

- “Make sure that resources are used more efficiently and kept in use for longer to minimise waste and reduce its environmental impacts by promoting reuse, remanufacturing and recycling”.
- “Work towards eliminating all avoidable waste by 2050 and all avoidable plastic waste by end of 2042”.³⁶

It also committed to the following actions on plastic and recycling:

- Publishing a new resource and waste strategy for England in 2018.
- Launching a call for evidence on using taxation to reduce single-use plastic waste.
- Working with industry to improve the recyclability of packaging.
- Reforming the producer responsibility system, including the packaging waste regulation.
- Improving the consistency of materials collected by local authorities through the [WRAP framework for greater consistency](#).³⁷

Deposit Return Scheme

In March 2018, the UK Government confirmed it would introduce a deposit return scheme in England for single-use containers. The Government press release announcing the scheme explained:

A deposit return scheme sees consumers pay an up-front deposit when they buy a drink, ranging from 8p in Sweden to 22p in Germany, which is redeemed on return of the empty drink container. Possible variants of a deposit return scheme include cash rewards for returning drinks containers without an upfront deposit.

³⁵ Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, [A Green Future: Our 25 Year Plan to Improve the Environment](#), 11 January 2018, p 85.

³⁶ *ibid*, p 83.

³⁷ *ibid*, pp 85–9.

This is often done through a network of ‘reverse vending machines’, where you insert your plastic or glass bottle or can and the machine returns your money. Once a bottle is returned, businesses are then responsible for making sure they are effectively recycled—a move that has led to a 97% recycling rate in Germany.³⁸

In its 2017/18 programme for government, the Scottish Government also committed to introducing a deposit return scheme. It published a consultation in June 2018; the foreword noted the UK Government’s announcement and acknowledged the potential benefits of coordination across the UK.³⁹ In May 2018, the Welsh Government also set out plans to introduce such a scheme.⁴⁰ Ministers from the UK, Wales and Scotland and officials from Northern Ireland met to discuss a UK-wide scheme in July.⁴¹

In evidence to the House of Commons Environmental Audit Committee, the Secretary of State for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, Michael Gove, said that introducing a scheme would likely require legislation and that the Government was hoping that such legislation would receive royal assent by 2020.⁴² Further details of the scheme are expected to be included in the forthcoming resource and waste strategy.

Budget 2018

In the 2018 budget, the Chancellor, Philip Hammond, announced a new tax on plastic packaging with less than 30 percent recycled plastic and reaffirmed the Government’s commitment to reforming the packaging producer responsibility scheme. The Chancellor also announced that the Government would not introduce a levy on disposal plastic cups.⁴³

Further details of the proposals were then published in a Treasury briefing:

2.26 million tonnes of plastic packaging are used in the UK each year. The vast majority is made from new plastic, rather than recycled material. This is because recycled plastic is often more expensive than new plastic, despite its lower environmental impacts.

A new tax will therefore be introduced on plastic packaging from 1 April 2022. Subject to consultation, this will mean that any business

³⁸ Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, ‘[Deposit Return Scheme in Fight Against Plastic](#)’, 28 March 2018.

³⁹ Scottish Government, [A Deposit Return Scheme for Scotland](#), 2018.

⁴⁰ BBC News, ‘[Disposable Plastic Waste Plans Set Out by Welsh Government](#)’, 8 May 2018.

⁴¹ Rob Cole, ‘[Ministers Meet to Discuss UK-Wide Deposit Return Scheme](#)’, *Resource*, 9 July 2018.

⁴² House of Commons Environmental Audit Committee, [Oral Evidence: 25-Year Environment Plan, HC 803](#), 18 April 2018, Q65.

⁴³ [HC Hansard, 29 October 2018, cols 665–6](#).

that produces or imports plastic packaging that does not contain at least 30 percent recycled content will have to pay a tax.

The tax will provide a clear economic incentive for businesses to use recycled material in the production of packaging which in turn will create greater demand for this material.

This is a brand-new tax and will be a world leading approach. Business will have until April 2022 to adapt their processes before the introduction of the tax. This will give them time to adjust their behaviour and manage any costs they face while ensuring action is still taken to tackle this important environmental issue.

This plastic packaging tax will work hand in hand with a reformed packaging producer responsibility system. Plans will be set out later this year to reform this system to make businesses who make and use packaging, including plastic, more responsible for the clean-up and recycling cost of that packaging. It will also encourage them to design and use plastic packaging that is easier to recycle, and discourage them from using plastics which are difficult to recycle, such as black plastic used in food trays.

The revenue that is collected from these measures will enable investment in actions that will address the issues surrounding single-use plastics, waste and litter to help improve the waste system in the UK.

A consultation on both these new policies will take place in the coming months to ensure that they work together in a coherent way.

Incineration currently plays a significant role in waste management in the UK, and the Government expects this to continue. However, in the long term the Government wants to maximise the amount of waste sent to recycling instead of incineration and landfill. Should wider policies not deliver the Government's waste ambitions in the future, it will consider the introduction of a tax on the incineration of waste, operating in conjunction with landfill tax, taking account of the possible impacts on local authorities.⁴⁴

UK Plastics Pact

The UK, Scottish and Welsh governments also support the [UK Plastics Pact](#), an initiative established by WRAP and the Ellen McArthur Foundation in April 2018. In total, 42 businesses, responsible for 80 percent of plastic packaging products sold in UK supermarkets have signed up to the pact,

⁴⁴ HM Treasury, '[Budget 2018: Single-use Plastics](#)', 19 October 2018, paras 4–11.

which commits to achieving the following targets by 2025:

- Eliminate problematic or unnecessary single-use plastic packaging through redesign, innovation or alternative (re-use) delivery models.
- 100% of plastic packaging to be reusable, recyclable or compostable.
- 70% of plastic packaging effectively recycled or composted.
- 30% average recycled content across all plastic packaging.⁴⁵

Reaction to Proposals

The announcement of the deposit return scheme was widely welcomed by environmental campaigners such as Surfers Against Sewage, the Marine Conservation Society and Campaign to Protect Rural England.⁴⁶

The British Plastics Federation also welcomed the scheme;⁴⁷ but criticised the 30 percent recycled content plastic tax announced in the budget. In a statement it said:

It is important that any interventions from government are effective, evidence-based, maximise recycling and minimise the amount of this valuable and recyclable material being lost to the environment. At this point in time, the BPF does not feel that taxation is the best way of achieving this.

When plastics unfortunately enter the marine environment from within the UK, it is typically due to the irresponsible disposal of plastic products through littering or dumping them in the sea. Placing a tax on one material without tackling the underlying behaviour will only change the composition of litter, not prevent it.⁴⁸

Conversely, Jacob Hayler, executive director of the Environmental Services Association, which represents the UK's resource and waste management industry announced its support for the proposal:

The industry has long been calling for measures to support end markets for recycling. Today the Chancellor has listened, and we welcome proposals to introduce a new tax on plastic packaging that

⁴⁵ WRAP, '[UK Businesses Make World-leading Pact to Tackle Plastic Pollution](#)', 26 April 2018.

⁴⁶ Surfers Against Sewage, '[Plastic Pollution Campaign Victory! Deposit Return Scheme Announced for England!](#)', 27 March 2018; Marine Conservation Society, '[Deposit Refund System Announced for England](#)', 29 March 2018; and Campaign to Protect Rural England, '[CPRE Delighted by Deposit Return Announcement](#)', 27 March 2018.

⁴⁷ British Plastics Federation, '[BPF Response to DRS Announcement](#)', accessed 7 November 2018.

⁴⁸ *ibid.*

contains less than 30 percent recycled content. Without stimulating the demand for recycled material, higher recycling rates will be unachievable.⁴⁹

Other Measures to Tackle Plastic Pollution

In addition to those relating to recycling, the Government has also proposed or introduced other measures to tackle plastic pollution. These include:

- **Single use carrier bags charge:** from 5 October 2015 large retailers were required by law to charge customers 5p for all single use plastic carrier bags. Government data suggested that the number of plastic carrier bags issued by the seven largest retailers fell by 86 percent from April 2017 to April 2018.⁵⁰ Recent reports have suggested that the Government may be planning on extending the scheme to all retailers and increasing the charge to 10p.⁵¹
- **A ban on microbeads:** in June 2018 a ban on the sale of products containing microbeads—tiny pieces of plastic used in cosmetics for their abrasive qualities—came into force.⁵²
- **A proposed ban on the sale of certain single-use plastics:** at the April 2018 Commonwealth heads of government meeting the Government announced its intention to ban the sale of plastic straws, drinks stirrers and plastic-stemmed cotton buds.⁵³
- **The Commonwealth Clean Oceans Alliance (CCOA):** at the same meeting, the Prime Minister also announced the establishment of the CCOA to tackle plastic pollution in Commonwealth countries. The initiative includes £61.4 million of UK funding for plastic pollution prevention.⁵⁴

For more information see the House of Commons Library briefing [Government Policy on Reducing Plastic Waste in the Maritime Environment](#).

⁴⁹ Environmental Services Association, '[ESA Welcomes Budget Proposals to Boost Plastics Recycling](#)', 29 October 2018.

⁵⁰ Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, '[Single-use Plastic Carrier Bags Charge: Data in England for 2017 to 2018](#)', 27 September 2018.

⁵¹ BBC News, '[Plastic Bags: Charge Could Rise to 10p and be Extended to Smaller Shops](#)', 30 August 2018.

⁵² Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, '[World Leading Microbeads Ban Comes Into Force](#)', 19 June 2018.

⁵³ Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, '[UK Government Rallies Commonwealth to Unite on Marine Waste](#)', 18 April 2018.

⁵⁴ Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, '[Commonwealth Countries Unite to Tackle Ocean Plastic Pollution](#)', 17 July 2018.

5. Further Information

- European Commission, [*A European Strategy for Plastics in a Circular Economy*](#), 16 January 2018
- Green Alliance, [*Completing the Circle: Creating Effective UK Markets for Recovered Resources*](#), June 2018
- House of Commons Environmental Audit Committee, [*Plastic Bottles: Turning Back the Plastic Tide*](#), 22 December 2017, HC 339 of session 2017–19
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- House of Commons Library, [*Household Recycling in the UK*](#), 12 September 2018
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