

Putting an end to plastic pollution in the UK

Organisations supporting this position paper are:



Growing crisis

Plastics are a ubiquitous and growing source of pollution and the exponential increase in these products has created a global crisis. Reducing the production and consumption of plastics, particularly single-use plastics, is an urgent priority.

Today, single-use plastics come in a multitude of forms and are made from a bewildering variety of polymers. They can be classified into categories and need to be tackled in order of priority according to the environmental threat they pose, their use value and the availability of alternatives.

We call for a wholesale transition away from our single-use plastic culture, with all but the safest and most essential single-use plastics to be phased out by 2025.

Progress report

The UK government has already taken several steps in the right direction, demonstrating global leadership through its early adoption of a ban on microbeads in rinse-off personal care products, and imposing a charge on single use plastic carrier bags.

The Resources and Waste Strategy offers a useful framework on which to build a more ambitious and deep-seated approach to address the root cause of the problem. However, there is a long way to go if the government is to honour the commitment in its 25-Year Environment Plan to end avoidable plastic waste by 2042.

It has pledged to be a global leader in tackling the scourge of plastic pollution, announcing that it will “reduce the demand for plastic, reduce the number of plastics in circulation and improve our recycling rates”. It is now time for the government to put in place the policy framework necessary to live up to this vision.

We urgently need joined-up thinking, greater ambition, shorter timeframes and a rapid transition from promises to policies that take a holistic and radical approach.

Next steps

We urge the government to address the plastic pollution problem head on by establishing a legislative framework to phase out and eliminate single-use plastics.

The number-one priority must be a reduction in the production and consumption of plastic items, followed by an increase in reuse and, finally, simple and cost-effective recycling, preferably within the UK.

This will require a ‘stick and carrot’ approach comprising bans, taxes, charges and other economic incentives.

At a glance – What we need

- Immediate bans on ‘pointless’ and ‘problem’ plastics, as defined below;
- Reduction targets for producers of single-use plastics, and taxes to reinforce these;
- Economic incentives to drive consumer behaviour change and reduce usage;
- A comprehensive strategy and regulatory measures to tackle sources of microplastic pollution.

These measures should be designed to:

- Reduce single-use items at both production and point of consumption; Reduce the number of polymers on the market;
- Incentivise design, production and use of reusable and refillable packaging;
- Facilitate increased recycling rates and recycled content;
- Prioritise closed-loop recycling over down-cycling;
- Focus on collection and recycling methods that are cost-effective and easy for end users;
- Minimise extraction of raw materials;
- Prevent the escape of plastic into the environment.



Specific recommendations

The government should, as a matter of urgency:

1. Establish legal definitions for single-use plastics, based on the properties of the material – in particular its behaviour and impact in the environment – rather than the production process or recyclability of the component materials. Ideally any definition would mirror that recently developed at EU level to provide harmony between markets.

2. Develop a hierarchy of single-use plastics to prioritise interventions. We propose classifying them within the five categories described in Table 1.

3. Focus on reduction in the use of single-use plastic items as a priority in the first instance.

4. Take steps to prevent a one-for-one substitution of single-use plastic products with single-use products made from other materials. All resource use has an environmental footprint. 'Pointless' items do not need replacing, and reusable alternatives are often available. Bio-based, 'biodegradable' or compostable plastics are not a solution to the plastic pollution crisis as they mostly present similar risks to the environment as conventional plastics.

5. Introduce an immediate ban on the sale and distribution of 'pointless' plastic items such as stirrers, sachets, cutlery, utensils and straws (subject to exemptions for essential plastics used, for example, in medicine or to ensure quality of life for people with disabilities, and whose replacement would cause greater environmental or social harm), and 'problem' plastic types/polymers such as PVC, black plastics and polystyrene, particularly EPS and XPS.

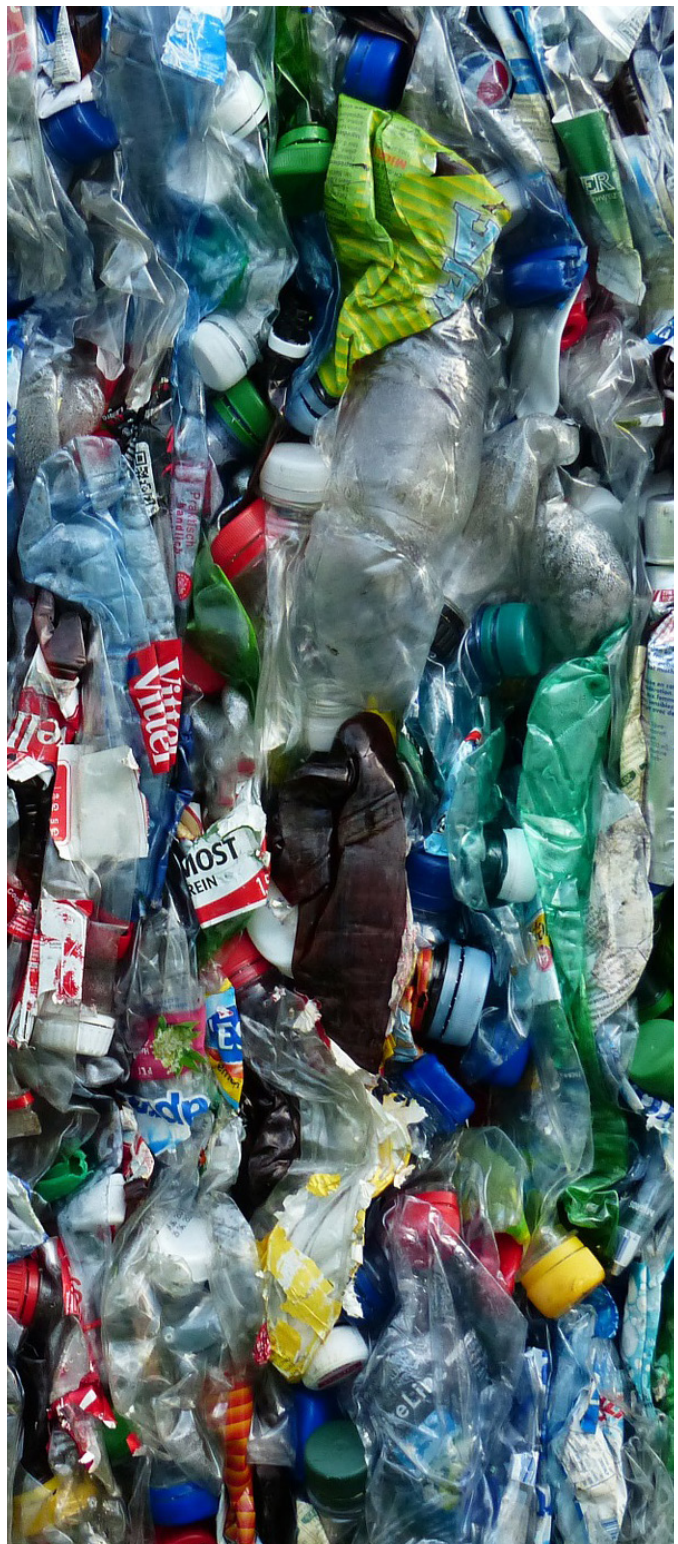
6. Introduce item-specific taxes and reduction targets on all remaining single-use plastics and packaging (subject to exemptions as above), in order to encourage a shift to reusable and lower impact alternatives, for example a charge on single-use cups at the point of sale, similar to charges for carrier bags.

7. Introduce a tax on new plastics at the product formation stage to encourage greater recycled content in the remaining single-use plastic items brought to market. A tax on new plastics should work alongside mandatory targets for recycled content to reward producers that exceed targets.

8. Ensure that all single-use plastics and other packaging types are covered by a reformed – and transparent – extended producer responsibility (EPR) scheme whereby producers and retailers cover the full end-of-life costs for items – and their

constituent materials – that they bring to market. Fees should be structured to incentivise design that puts reusability first and recyclability second, to drive a continued reduction in the production and sale of single-use plastics. Taxes could also be used to encourage such designs.

9. Establish a monitoring and evaluation process for all new taxes and charges, and review their effectiveness periodically, with a view to increasing the level of the tax and/or expediting phase-outs if further declines in consumption are required.



Expert advice

Deciding what should be phased out, and when, will be crucial to success, and will require a dedicated resource. To this end, we propose that the UK government establishes an expert, independent Committee on Plastics Pollution.

This committee should largely comprise, and be chaired by, respected academics with expertise in materials science, environmental science, waste and recycling infrastructure and food systems. It should also include trade union representation, a disability advisor, and those with business experience in associated industries. To avoid a conflict with commercial interests, we recommend that the committee does not include members who currently hold roles in these firms.

The committee should publish its recommendations to government on which items should be phased

out and when, and these recommendations should be made public. The government should have an obligation to respond to each recommendation, and to publish an explanation if it decides not to follow one.

To give industry time to adapt, we propose that the government develops a flexible, though indicative, timetable according to which it expects specific items to be phased out.

Prior to finalisation of the proposed list, the committee should take reasonable steps to consult relevant specialists or representatives of affected parties regarding potential impact on, for example, individuals protected from discrimination under the Equalities Act 2010.

	Definition	Examples	Policy tools	Timeline for phase out
Pointless plastic	Single-use plastic with limited practical social utility for which no alternatives are required and that can be phased out without significant behavioural or waste infrastructure changes.	Relates more to context of use rather than particular use or polymer, e.g. excessive packaging (sachets, double/triple confectionery wrappers, vacuum-packed pre-sliced fruit, batches of fruit/veg on display trays or in 'poly' net bags).	Measures to restrict certain applications, e.g. bans through packaging regulations; to rationalise use, e.g. taxation; and to enable public accountability, e.g. require retailers to publish uses of plastic in store and report on measures taken to reduce plastic.	Pre-2020 – Many retailers are already leading the way here.
Problem plastic	Single-use plastic that is non-recyclable, recyclable only at considerable cost and/or is particularly harmful in the environment.	Microbeads, products that contain multiple polymer types (e.g. PET bottles with shrink-wrap sleeve); black plastic, polystyrene, complex polymer blends. Many non-conventional plastics (such as biodegradable plastics) would also fall into this category as they are not currently recyclable within standard waste management systems.	Bans on certain polymers and uses of plastic, bans on hard-to-recycle combinations, EPR that reflects full-cost coverage.	Pre-2020
Replaceable plastic	Single-use plastic that performs a useful function, for which readily available alternatives exist that do not cause significant environmental or social harm.	Coffee cups, plastic cotton buds, plastic bags, fast-food containers, some packaging of prepared food.	Taxes on producers and retailers, increasing over time, leading to specific bans. Consumer-facing charges. Measures to ensure public accountability as above. Mere substitution of one single-use material with another must be avoided, with focus on reusability and closed-loop refillable alternatives.	Early 2020s
Hard-to-replace plastic	Single-use plastics that perform a valuable function and are not readily substitutable without major behavioural change, waste infrastructural change, food system change, or product innovation.	Plastic packaging ...used to protect perishable goods fresh to retailers over long supply chains e.g. crisp and sweet packets	Universal phase-out introduced on SUPs with periodically reviewed exemption lists, with onus on producers/retailers to justify exemptions. A cross-departmental committee established by government to assess these plastics. R&D funds and tax incentives to bring innovative alternatives to market.	2025
Essential plastic	Single-use plastics that perform an essential function, where an alternative is unlikely to emerge in the medium term, and where increasing the cost of the item would result in social harm.	Pre-sterilised single-use medical applications, syringes, single-use pre-sterilised plastic pipette tips used in laboratories for research purposes, e.g. forensic, zoology and biology labs (not necessarily medical research), single-use plastics used in forensic investigations; items necessary to ensure quality of life for people with disabilities.	Automatic exemption by category in any phase-out legislation. Automatic exemption by category from single-use taxes. Periodic reviews of exemptions to take account of innovations.	