

APPG on Microplastics - Call for evidence: Wildlife and Countryside Link Response

13th February 2026

This response is on behalf of nature and animal welfare coalition Wildlife and Countryside Link ([Link](#)).

Contributors

In your view, what are the most significant sources/contributors/pathways to microplastic pollution?

- *What up-to-date information do you have on the scale of different sources of microplastic pollution?*
- *What are the key gaps in knowledge and monitoring of microplastic pollution?*
- *Where possible, please include quantitative data or references on emission volumes or relative source contributions in the UK specifically.*

There are two main types of microplastic, primary microplastics which are plastic products that are designed and produced in sizes of less 5mm, and secondary microplastics which comes from the breakdown of larger plastic products or macroplastics.

Litter

Litter is a key source of secondary microplastics. Litter was found in 92% of places surveyed by Keep Britain Tidy in England.¹ The Marine Conservation Society Beachwatch project removed 764,451 items of litter from beaches across the UK in 2024.² Whilst it difficult to estimate the exact volume of litter produced each year, it is highly prevalent with coastal areas having 0.053 items for every metre squared, and inland areas 0.03 items.³

¹ [Keep Britain Tidy: A Rubbish Reality: Our litter problem and why it matters](#)

² [MCS: State of our Beaches Report 2024: Policy recommendations](#)

³ [Napper et al., 2025: Citizen science reveals litter trends in the UK: Population density effects on coastal and inland regions](#)



Plastic from single-use packaging is the main constituent of litter. [Planet Patrol](#)'s 2019-2024 Litter Report, [People Powered Progress](#), analysed nearly 300,000 pieces of litter picked and recorded by citizen scientists across the UK. Between 2019 and 2024, plastic consistently dominated the material composition of their recorded litter, accounting for 40.84% of materials in 2024. The vast majority of Planet Patrol's litter picking sessions take place along UK waterways, and unretrieved plastic litter in the water upstream contributes to downstream microplastic loads over time. The top littered brands found in this dataset were 1) Coca-Cola, 2) McDonald's, and 3) Walkers (crisps) - the primarily products from these brands that were recorded were plastic bottles, crisps packets, and other packaging, the majority plastic or laminates containing plastic.

Intentionally added microplastics

Sources of primary microplastics include intentionally added microplastics in products such as cosmetics (microplastics in rinse-off cosmetics have been banned in the UK since 2018), laundry detergents, cleaning products, and fertilisers. Intentionally added microplastics can be released directly to the environment, with between 5,400 – 39,700 tonnes of microplastics released annually to European soils through controlled release fertilisers, fertiliser additives, treated seeds and capsule suspension pesticides.⁴

Defra's 2025, *Option Appraisal for Intentionally Added Microplastics*, estimates emissions of intentionally added microplastics throughout the UK over a twenty-year period, from 2024 to 2043. The total volume of intentionally added microplastics expected to be used over the twenty-year period is estimated at 160,000 tonnes, with around 50,000 tonnes (almost a third) emitted directly to the environment.⁵

The largest sources of intentionally added microplastics over the twenty-year period are estimated to be:

- Materials used in synthetic sports surfaces (16,866 tonnes),
- Detergents and maintenance products (13,666 tonnes),
- Oil and gas (7,891 tonnes)
- Cosmetic products (7,445 tonnes).

Runoff and wastewater

⁴ [ECHA: Annex XV Restriction Report](#)

⁵ [UK Government commissioned report: Option Appraisal for Intentionally Added Microplastics](#)



Roads are a major pathway to the ocean providing a conduit for 66% of the microplastics entering the ocean.⁶ This is due to microplastics from sources such as tyre wear, road markings, paved surfaces and litter, which may enter the ocean via rainwater run-off directly into watercourses or via the wastewater network.⁷

Wastewater treatment accounts for a further 25% of microplastics input to the ocean,⁸ with microplastics commonly present in wastewater systems, particularly microfibers.⁹ Washing clothing and textiles (industrial and household) creates microfibres through abrasion and shedding of fibres, which then enter wastewater systems.¹⁰ Sources of microplastics in domestic wastewater and sewage also include the use of cosmetics, personal care products, cleaning agents and pharmaceuticals. Microplastics from more complex industrial and hospital effluents, landfill leachates and road runoff are also fed into wastewater treatment plants.¹¹

In the UK, 30% of sewers are separated meaning that sewage and stormwater runoff are kept separate.¹² These minimise the volume of water requiring treatment. If stormwater is not treated it can contain a wide range of microplastics. The majority (70%) of UK sewers are combined, taking sewage and surface water runoff together for treatment. This increases the risk of overflows of effluent when treatment capacity is breached and it has been estimated that between 1% and 15% of wastewater can overflow during extreme rain events, resulting in untreated sewage being discharged directly into the environment.¹³ Since these discharges are made up of inputs from homes, industry, and stormwater runoff they contain microplastics from a wide range of sources.

Agriculture

Agricultural plastics (agriplastics) are an under-recognised source of microplastics. Agriplastics are used for multiple reasons in UK farming including as protective films, nets, irrigation piping and for packaging of products for use on farms. Reporting on agricultural plastic use is poor globally. An estimate some years ago put the amount of UK agricultural

⁶ [IUCN: Issues brief: Plastic pollution](#)

⁷ [IUCN: Issues brief: Plastic pollution](#)

⁸ [IUCN: Issues brief: Plastic pollution](#)

⁹ [Ziajahromi et al., 2017: Wastewater treatment plants as a pathway for microplastics: Development of a new approach to sample wastewater-based microplastics](#)

¹⁰ [IUCN: Issues brief: Plastic pollution](#)

¹¹ [Hough, 2024: Using new contaminants information to re-assess environmental risks from sewage sludge.](#)

¹² [OSPAR Commission: Review of BAT and BEP in Urban Wastewater Treatment Systems](#)

¹³ [OSPAR Commission: Review of BAT and BEP in Urban Wastewater Treatment Systems](#)

plastic waste generated each year at 135,000 tonnes.¹⁴ However this did not take into account all agriplastic products used in the UK, so is likely an underestimate. This plastic often breaks down during use on farms or is not properly disposed of, leading to microplastic pollution and leaching of chemicals from plastics into the environment.¹⁵

As well as the intentional use of agriplastics, large amounts of microplastics are added to soils through the application of treated sewage sludge (biosolids) to UK farmland.¹⁶ Sewage sludge is a byproduct from wastewater treatment containing filtered solids. It contains microplastics from wastewater/sewage that are filtered out and concentrated in the sludge. As a result of the application of sewage sludge to farmland, treating wastewater does not ultimately prevent microplastics from polluting the environment and the UK has some of the highest rates of soil microplastic contamination in Europe.¹⁷ For example, in England up to 99% of microplastics partitioned from wastewater during treatment become concentrated in biosolids, with 94% of these microplastics being applied to farmland.¹⁸

Waste fishing gear

Waste fishing gear is another key source of microplastics. Every year around 4,500 tonnes of fishing gear becomes waste in the UK, along with 7,000 tonnes of gear from aquaculture (seafood farming).¹⁹ This is mostly made from plastic and when mismanaged ends up in the Ocean. Although this source is relatively low in terms of overall tonnage, the effects fishing and aquaculture gear waste have on people and nature are disproportionately harmful as the waste often ends up in the sea, where it breaks down and enters the marine food chain. In European seas, ALDFG accounts for roughly a third of marine litter, estimated to be over 11,000 tonnes per year.²⁰

Nurdles

Nurdles, are small plastic pellets about the size of a lentil, that are melted down to make almost all plastic products, they are a major source of primary microplastic pollution. Billions of nurdles are used each year to make products, but thousands of tonnes also spill

¹⁴ [CIWM: Agricultural Waste](#)

¹⁵ [EIA: Cultivating Plastic: Part 3 - Agriplastic waste mismanagement and criminality](#)

¹⁶ [Eftec and UKCEH report for Defra: Option appraisal for intentionally added microplastics](#)

¹⁷ [Lofty, et al., 2017: Estimations of contamination onto European agricultural land via sewage sludge recycling](#)

¹⁸ [UK Government commissioned report: Option Appraisal for Intentionally Added Microplastics](#)

¹⁹ [Defra: End-of-life fishing and aquaculture gear policy options](#)

²⁰ [European Commission: Reducing Marine Litter: action on single use plastics and fishing gear](#)

directly into the environment around the world.²¹ Fidra's evidence from the global citizen science survey, the Great Nurdle Hunt, demonstrates the UK is a significant international hotspot for pellet pollution. With more than 5,800 plastics related businesses operating across the country, an estimated 1,000 tonnes of pellets (or 53 billion individual nurdles) are lost to the UK environment annually. Fidra's 2025 analysis confirms that nurdle pollution has been recorded in all four UK nations, from Cornwall to Shetland, spanning 80 counties.²² Since 2013, volunteers, organisations and community groups have conducted over 2,700 nurdle hunts to document pollution, raise awareness and advocate for change in the UK. Nurdles have been found in 83% of all UK hunts, including within six national parks (the New Forest, the South Downs, the North Yorkshire Moors, Loch Lomond and the Trossachs, Eryri/Snowdonia and the Pembrokeshire Coast) and 168 Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs). In 2025, the UK suffered two major plastic pellet spills in the form of nurdles from the plastic industry,²³ and biobeads from the water industry,²⁴ devastating beaches across the country.

Monitoring

Sufficient monitoring of contaminants in the environment is vital to understand the true health of our environment and the extent of microplastic pollution. Monitoring of discharges to the environment, such as wastewater and road runoff are also vital, acting as an alert system to recognise where contaminants are entering the water environment. To ensure that water quality threats can be identified and rectified at a more local level, a more comprehensive monitoring regime covering a wider range of pollutants across water, sediment and biota, must be implemented. Monitoring should include all types of water bodies (rivers, estuaries and coastal waters) as well as potential pollution pathways such as sewage discharges, sewage sludge and highway outfalls. All monitoring data must be made publicly accessible to ensure transparency and accountability.

Monitoring programmes should also be aligned across freshwater and coastal waters to meet targets for Water Framework Regulations and Marine Strategy Regulations. Plastics which impact marine health are not routinely monitored in freshwaters where they predominantly originate from. There should be a combination of targeted monitoring of

²¹ [Fidra & Oracle: Mapping the global plastic pellet supply chain](#)

²² [The Great Nurdle Hunt: UK: A Global Hotspot of Preventable Plastic Pollution](#)

²³ [The Great Nurdle Hunt: News Bulletin: Plastic Pellet Spill in North Sea](#)

²⁴ [The Great Nurdle Hunt: UK reeling from spills of nurdles & biobeads as microplastics pollution builds in our waters](#)

known pollutants and nontargeted screening to ensure advanced warning of problematic pollutants. Monitoring programmes should also include investigations into sources and pathways of water pollution to improve the evidence base for source control measures, e.g., in wastewater discharges and agricultural and road runoff.

Impacts

What do you see as the most significant impacts of microplastic pollution across health, environment, and the economy?

- *Where is there strong evidence? Where is more research needed?*
- *What are the key gaps in knowledge and monitoring of impacts?*
- *Please include any insights on indirect or systemic impacts, for example, on soil productivity, carbon cycling, or food systems.*

Impacts on animals

Microplastics have significant impacts on wild animals. Toxic chemicals found in microplastics can interfere with hormones, disrupting breeding, development and behaviour.²⁵ Microplastic particles can block absorptive surfaces in the body, such as in the gut, causing reduced energy uptake; and can cross into cells, causing chemical toxicity. This can have “negative impacts on food consumption, growth, reproduction and survival”.²⁶ This presents a particular risk to marine animals such as seabirds and large marine mammals many of which consume microplastics, leading to toxic concentrations and starvation.²⁷ For example, nurdles have been found in the stomachs of multiple UK species such as puffins.²⁸

Microplastics can contain harmful substances such as stabilisers, pigments, plasticisers and flame-retardants, and may absorb secondary environmental pollutants such as Persistent Organic Pollutants (POPs) or metals, which may be released if ingested.³ POPs impair reproduction and disrupt marine wildlife’s energy balance, endocrine and immune systems, making them more vulnerable to infectious diseases,²⁹ and may affect successive generations of marine mammals by accumulating and passing to young through breastfeeding.³⁰ The

²⁵ [WWF: Impacts of plastic](#)

²⁶ [Science Advice for Policy by European Academies: A scientific perspective on microplastics in nature and society: Evidence review report](#)

²⁷ [Merrill et al., 2023: Microplastics in marine mammal blubber, melon, & other tissues: Evidence of translocation](#)

²⁸ [Phys.org: Scottish puffins found with plastic pellets in their stomachs](#)

²⁹ [Desforges et al., 2016: Immunotoxic effects of environmental pollutants in marine mammals](#)

³⁰ [Williams et al., 2020: Juvenile harbor porpoises in the UK are exposed to a more neurotoxic mixture of polychlorinated biphenyls than adults](#)

MICRO project made a first attempt at defining economic impacts of microplastics on the UK aquaculture (oyster) industry in the Channel region and indicated a cost of between £1.5M - £500M.³¹

It is estimated that 1.5–4.5% of all global plastics production ends up in the ocean every year,³² and over 700 marine species have been shown to ingest plastic debris including microplastics.³³ Once microplastics are in the environment it is practically impossible to remove them and due to their persistence they continue to increase in quantity. They can be ingested by marine life at every stage of the food chain. 63% of shrimp in the North Sea have been found to contain synthetic fibres.³⁴ Reducing the amount of microplastics entering the environment is essential to achieving good environmental status in our seas, as defined in the [UK Marine Strategy](#). This would also support the aims of the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), in particular SDG 6 (Clean Water and Sanitation), SDG 12 (sustainable consumption and production), SDG 14 (Life below Water), and SDG 15 (Life on Land).

Impacts on soils and crops

Microplastics also have significant impacts on soil health and on both wild and cultivated plants. They reduce soil quality, and inhibit photosynthesis, water and nutrient uptake.³⁵ Microplastics can be taken up by plants from the soil, meaning they enter the food chain of both humans and animals. This makes the use of biosolids and agriplastics on farms a particular risk as microplastics can contaminate crops destined for human or animal consumption. A recent study found a staggering 1,450% increase in microplastic levels in soil samples after just four years of repeated sludge application.³⁶ Current agricultural use of biosolids fails to protect 95% of soil biota from microplastics with 39% of species studied affected by 100% exposure.³⁷ Microplastics can also threaten soil health and ecosystem functions (e.g. negatively impact carbon and nutrient cycling, and crop productivity).³⁸

³¹ [Written evidenc to Parliament from CEFAS](#)

³² [Science: Here's how much plastic enters the ocean each year](#)

³³ [Kuhn and van Franeker, 2020: Quantitative overview of marine debris ingested by marine megafauna](#)

³⁴ [Devriese et al., 2015: Microplastic contamination in brown shrimp \(Crangon crangon, Linnaeus 1758\) from coastal waters of the Southern North Sea and Channel area](#)

³⁵ [EIA: Cultivating Plastic: Part 2 - Environmental and human health harm caused by agriplastics](#) and [Iqbal et al., 2023: Impacts of soil microplastics on crops: A review.](#)

³⁶ [Ramage et al., 2025: Microplastics in agricultural soils following sewage sludge applications: Evidence from a 25-year study](#)

³⁷ [Boisseaux et al., 2025: A Quantitative Environmental Risk Assessment for Microplastics in Sewage Sludge Applied to Land.](#)

³⁸ [Hough, 2024: Using new contaminants information to re-assess environmental risks from sewage sludge.](#); [Ramage et al., 2025: Microplastics in agricultural soils following sewage sludge applications: Evidence from a 25-year study](#)

Although there is increasing evidence of the impacts of microplastics on soil organisms, there are critical gaps in our understanding of the interactions between mixtures of contaminants such as those within biosolids.³⁹ Avoiding the application of biosolids (and other contaminated inputs) to land brings co-benefits of protecting vital agricultural soil and crop systems from exposure to other contaminants (PFAS, pharmaceuticals etc).⁴⁰

Solutions

In your view, what needs to be done in the UK to tackle microplastic pollution?

- *In your view, what legislative action, if any, is needed?*
- *What government policy changes, if any, are needed?*
- *What are the most effective, urgent or practical measures?*
- *How could the circular economy and Extended Producer Responsibility be utilised to tackle microplastic pollution?*
- *How could action on microplastics be embedded within existing UK policy frameworks (such as the Plan for Water, 25 Year Environment Plan, or Circular Economy initiatives)?*

Addressing microplastics as a source of plastic pollution requires interventions at all stages of the plastics lifecycle: in production and transportation of raw materials (e.g. plastic pellets, flakes and powders); in product design, to eliminate intentionally-added microplastics and limit losses through abrasion and shedding; in terms of reducing the overall volume of plastics produced, consumed and disposed of; and in managing plastic waste and disposal.

Managing production and transportation

Losses of plastic pellets (nurdles) during manufacturing, transport, storage, and processing are a significant contributor to primary microplastic pollution.⁴¹ The UK should match or exceed the EU's new Regulation on preventing pellet losses by introducing binding supply-chain rules for all companies that produce, handle, transport or store pellets. These should include mandatory spill-prevention measures, secure packaging, staff training, independent certification and annual reporting of pellet losses, including for international carriers using UK ports and waters. Unlike the EU framework, which leaves major loopholes for smaller operators, UK rules should apply to all pellet handlers, as SMEs are also significant sources of

³⁹ [Hough, 2024: Using new contaminants information to re-assess environmental risks from sewage sludge.](#)

⁴⁰ [UK Government commissioned report: Option Appraisal for Intentionally Added Microplastics](#)

⁴¹ [Nordic Council of Ministers: Addressing microplastics in a global agreement on plastic pollution](#)



leakage. Strong, enforceable regulation would replace ineffective voluntary schemes and deliver rapid reductions in one of the most pervasive forms of microplastic pollution.

In addition, the UK should adopt the International Maritime Organisation (IMO) Circular MEPC.1/Circ.909⁴² into national policy and practice to minimise the risk of plastic pellet loss into the marine environment and champion ongoing international efforts to develop binding requirements in global legislation, ensuring that pellet containment and reporting standards are harmonised and enforceable worldwide.

Product design

The UK Government should restrict the use of intentionally added microplastics, with several options proven to be cost beneficial in Defra's 2025 Options Appraisal.⁴³ As a minimum the UK should align with the EU restriction on intentionally added microplastics under REACH, which could reduce emissions by approx. 72%, with even broader restrictions on use having the potential to reduce emissions by 87 - 100%. The same report also found that measures to prevent emissions from infill materials already in use in sports pitches, and reducing sewage spreading, provided relatively cost beneficial options to further reduce emissions, with the added benefit that these options would prevent emissions of other contaminants such as 'forever chemicals'. Therefore, a combination of restrictions on use (fully aligning with the EU as a minimum) and remedial measures would be most effective at reducing levels of intentionally added microplastics entering the environment.

The UK's 2018 microbead ban provides an important precedent for regulating microplastic pollution at source. By prohibiting the manufacture and sale of rinse-off cosmetics containing intentionally added plastic microbeads, the UK effectively removed a clearly defined microplastic source from personal care products. However, the ban's narrow scope, covering only rinse-off products, leaves major gaps as microplastics in leave-on cosmetics, cleaning products, industrial abrasives, and other consumer items remain unregulated. Expanding the ban to cover all intentionally added microplastics (including fertilisers, microplastic infill, plant protection products, cosmetics, household and industrial detergents, cleaning products, paints and products used in the oil and gas industry), combined with monitoring, reporting, and enforcement mechanisms, would ensure that the UK builds on the microbead success and tackles a broader range of microplastic pollution upstream.⁴⁴ This approach could be

⁴² [IMO: Recommendations for the carriage of plastic pellets by sea in freight containers](#)

⁴³ [UK Government commissioned report: Option Appraisal for Intentionally Added Microplastics](#)

⁴⁴ [Kukkola et al., 2024: Beyond microbeads: Examining the role of cosmetics in microplastic pollution and spotlighting unanswered questions](#)



embedded in UK policy frameworks such as Defra's 25 Year Environment Plan and Circular Economy initiatives, linking domestic measures to global efforts and demonstrating leadership in source reduction.

Evidence shows that products such as textiles and tyres are major sources of microplastics throughout all stages of their lifecycles.⁴⁵ Design interventions, such as improving durability, eliminating unnecessary plastic components, prioritising repairable and reusable formats, and incorporating built-in capture technologies, like the filters mandated on new washing machines in France to trap microfibrils, can reduce microplastic shedding and make products easier to reuse or recycle.^{46,47} Embedding binding product design standards in UK policy and linking them to the ongoing global plastics treaty negotiations would help minimise environmental impacts from production and use, advance the transition to reuse, and promote a circular economy by reducing virgin plastic demand and pollution across product lifecycles.⁴⁸

Measures should be introduced to encourage reusable over single use packaging, both to reduce plastic production and minimising littering when reusable packaging is returned. As a first step, the Government should encourage reuse by exempting reusable packaging from pEPR fees. It should also reinvest a proportion of pEPR fees in reuse infrastructure. Further steps to encourage reuse are explored in our paper: [Beyond bans: towards a new model of consumption](#).

Reducing overall plastic production and use

As noted above, agriplastics are a particularly concerning source of microplastic pollution. So-called biodegradable alternatives may still leave behind microplastics, and research shows that biodegradable and bio-based plastics are similarly toxic to conventional plastics, with the potential to transfer harmful chemicals into crops and the wider food chain.⁴⁹ They cannot be safely replaced and the only solution is therefore to reduce their use.

EPR for non-packaging agriplastics should be re-consulted on by the UK, applying the polluter pays principle. This should include strong price incentives for reduction in the use of

⁴⁵ [EIA: Convention on Plastic Pollution: Essential Elements: Microplastics](#)

⁴⁶ [Ellen MacArthur Foundation, 2021: Circular economy design guide for plastics](#).

⁴⁷ [European Environment Agency \(EEA\), 2020: Circular economy in Europe: Developing the knowledge base](#).

⁴⁸ [EIA: Addressing plastic product design in the Global Plastics Treaty – Briefing](#)

⁴⁹ [EIA: Cultivating Plastic Part 4 - Caution with regards to the adoption of potential agriplastic alternatives](#) and [Zimmerman et al., 2020: Are bioplastics and plant-based materials safer than conventional plastics? In vitro toxicity and chemical composition](#)

agriplastics taking into account the full environmental costs of their use, alongside support for reuse and recycling to reduce the risk of improper disposal.

Existing tools to tackle plastic use, such as the plastic packaging tax, should be strengthened. Currently packaging is exempt if it is 30% recycled. This percentage should be increased to reduce production of new plastic and encourage proper management through recycling. The rate of the tax should also be increased to discourage plastic use altogether. Chemically “recycled” plastic counted under the mass-balance approach should not count towards the recycled plastic exemption. Chemical recycling technologies such as pyrolysis and gasification are energy-intensive, low-yield, and often result in fuel rather than true recycled material.⁵⁰ Counting these processes towards recycled content undermines the objectives of the tax, fails to encourage genuine recycling, and risks locking the UK into environmentally harmful and inefficient plastic production practices.⁵¹

Managing plastic waste and disposal

The Government’s Deposit Return Scheme must be implemented in full and on time in October 2027. This will incentivise plastic drinks bottles to be returned instead of littered by placing a deposit on drinks containers which is returned to consumers when they return them to stores.

The Government’s packaging Extended Producer Responsibility (pEPR) scheme must also be strengthened to minimise plastic pollution. To meet Defra’s Environmental Improvement Plan target to cut residual waste by 24% by 2028, pEPR fees should be varied to reward reusable and sustainable packaging and penalise unnecessary and polluting formats (going beyond current plans to reward recyclability).⁵² Higher fees must be placed on packaging types with the highest environmental impacts, including those most likely to be littered and those containing harmful chemicals. Litter payments must also be introduced. Under the original proposal for pEPR, producers would have paid for the cost of managing packaging that is littered or placed in public bins. Despite the huge impacts of litter on nature, this portion of pEPR payments was dropped in England.

Biosolid spreading on agricultural land comes with a high risk of microplastics entering human and animal food chains. Current regulations only require biosolids to be tested for certain

⁵⁰ [Zero Waste Europe: Fifty years: chemical recycling’s fading promise](#)

⁵¹ [Wildlife and Countryside Link: Plastic Packaging Tax - chemical recycling and adoption of a mass balance approach](#)

⁵² [Wildlife and Countryside Link: Packaging EPR – what it is, why we need it now and how to make it better](#)



metals, meaning toxic levels of microplastics (and other unregulated persistent chemicals) are being added to agricultural soils. Agricultural use of biosolids should be phased out until they are proven to be a clean, safe resource and regulations should enforce testing for all potentially harmful contaminants before application.⁵³ Commitments by regulators to strengthen soil protection, monitoring and testing must be upheld, with clear timeframes and transparent reporting.⁵⁴

Addressing microplastic contamination in biosolids also requires action across the wastewater system. Upstream measures are essential to prevent microplastics entering sewage sludge in the first place, including source control through restrictions on harmful plastic additives, collaboration with product manufacturers, and treating domestic and industrial wastewater streams separately. These measures must be complemented by downstream investment in alternative wastewater and sludge treatment technologies. The water industries producing and selling sewage sludge derived fertiliser to farmers must use innovative treatment technologies capable of removing microplastics and other micropollutants from these products. Where contamination persists, the application of contaminated wastes to land should be restricted or phased out in line with emerging scientific evidence and findings from the water industry's chemical investigations programmes.

Defra is currently consulting on options to reform the regulatory framework for sludge applied to agricultural land. Wildlife and Countryside Link is currently considering our response to that consultation.

Plastic pollution from fishing gear must be reduced by enabling proper disposal. Only 61% of harbours provide free disposal, and many exclude end-of-life gear. Where harbours do accept fishing gear waste, only 31% send it for recycling.⁵⁵ Inadequate waste infrastructure creates logistical or cost barriers for fishers, incentivising improper disposal. The UK Government and devolved governments should work together to require all ports and harbours to provide free waste collection, ensuring gear is recycled where possible. Suitable free disposal facilities must also be provided for aquaculture gear brought ashore not at ports or harbours. This would make proper disposal easy and free for fishing and aquaculture businesses, reducing intentional discards or abandonment at sea and supporting the transition to a circular economy.⁵⁶ Importantly, the UK should prioritise the development and rollout of mandatory

⁵³ [Fidra: Environmental Risks from Sewage Sludge](#) and [Fidra and EIA: The Agricultural Use of Sewage Sludge](#)

⁵⁴ [EIA: Cultivating Plastic Part 4 - Caution with regards to the adoption of potential agriplastic alternatives](#)

⁵⁵ [WDC: Tackling ghost gear: Research on and solutions for the state of harbour waste management in the UK](#)

⁵⁶ [Wildlife and Countryside Link: Fishing and aquaculture gear waste: problems and](#)



EPR for fishing gear, ensuring producers share responsibility for end-of-life management and incentivising design improvements to reduce microplastic pollution.

International

Whilst the above measures largely concern tackling microplastic pollution within the UK, the UK also causes significant plastic pollution overseas. We exported 598 million kilos to be processed in other countries in 2024,⁵⁷ demonstrating continued reliance on sending waste abroad rather than managing it domestically. Much of this plastic travels through opaque and poorly monitored trade routes, where mis-declaration, documentation gaps and weak oversight mean waste labelled as recyclable often never reaches legitimate processing facilities. Instead, it is mishandled, dumped, burned or left to leak into the environment in countries without adequate waste management infrastructure, contributing directly to microplastic pollution, including microplastics, long after the material leaves the UK.^{58,59,60,61} The Government must use the existing powers in the Environment Act 2021 to ban all plastic waste exports to non-OECD countries, as well as OECD countries with a high risk of waste mismanagement, such as Türkiye.

Ultimately plastic production and pollution is a global problem and requires a global solution alongside national action. The UK has so far supported a strong global plastics treaty containing provisions requiring a reduction in overall plastic production, provisions to address plastic pellets, as well as elimination of chemicals of concern from plastics, and it must continue to do so. To be seen as a true global leader on plastic pollution action, the UK should not only call for strong international agreements but lead by example and implement robust domestic regulations on plastic pellets and intentionally added microplastics. The EU has already agreed regulations to prevent plastic pellet loss and has banned intentionally added microplastics, the UK should now match or exceed these measures to prevent microplastic pollution on UK land and waters. Currently negotiations on a global plastics treaty are stalled but this need not hinder domestic action as further UK regulation on plastic can demonstrate the potential for solutions. This [Environmental Investigation Agency briefing](#) explores how international negotiations could be restarted.

⁵⁷ [Basel Action Network: United Kingdom Export Data](#)

⁵⁸ [Dirty Deals – Part One: Evidencing illegalities in the global plastic waste trade](#)

⁵⁹ [Dirty Deals – Part Two: Evidencing illegalities in the global plastic waste trade](#)

⁶⁰ [EIA: The UK's Dirty Secret](#)

⁶¹ [Dirty Deals – Part One: Evidencing illegalities in the global plastic waste trade](#) and [Dirty Deals – Part Two: Evidencing illegalities in the global plastic waste trade](#)

Final Reflections

What would a cohesive UK strategy on microplastics look like to you? What would a UK microplastics roadmap or target-based framework need to include?

No response.

Wildlife and Countryside Link (Link) is the largest nature coalition in England, bringing together 94 organisations to use their joint voice for the protection of the natural world and animals.

For questions or further information please contact:

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The following organisations support this response:

EIA (Environmental Investigation Agency)

Planet Patrol

Marine Conservation Society

ReLoop

RSPCA

Keep Britain Tidy

Fidra