Wildlife and Countryside Link evidence to Environmental Audit Committee inquiry:

Coffee Cups and Plastic Bottles: disposable packaging

April 2017

Wildlife and Countryside Link (Link) brings together 47 environment and animal protection organisations to advocate for the conservation and protection of wildlife, countryside and the marine environment.

Our members practice and advocate environmentally sensitive land management, and encourage respect for and enjoyment of natural landscapes and features, the historic and marine environment and biodiversity. Taken together we have the support of over eight million people in the UK and manage over 750,000 hectares of land.

This response is supported by the following five Link members:

- Greenpeace UK
- Environmental Investigation Agency (EIA)
- Marine Conservation Society (MCS)
- Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust (WWT)
- Whale and Dolphin Conservation (WDC)

N.B. Much of the information in this document has been shared by these members in the form of a collective and robust set of key points. References and further information can be found within individual submissions of these organisations, as well as the Link response to the recent microbeads consultation.

Executive summary

In the UK alone, 35 million plastic bottles are bought every day (around 200 per person per year), yet 44% of these are not recycled. Each day 15 million unrecycled bottles have the potential to enter our freshwaters and oceans and cause a host of environmental problems, which is why we are calling for the UK Government to take decisive action now.

Marine plastics pollution is insidious. Single-use plastic bottles and disposable coffee cups (together with a host of other plastic packaging, aluminium cans and glass bottles) have many and transboundary impacts on marine and coastal environments, wildlife and even human

wellbeing. Much work is needed in the UK to increase production of non-polluting alternatives, increase reuse, improve recycling standards and disposal regimes, increase public awareness and better engage industry in order to meet the UK's targets in resource efficiency and ocean health and biodiversity.

Link welcomes the Committee's call for evidence on ways to deal with these problems, but cautions that the economic arguments must not be considered above and beyond the environmental ones. The services we get from a clean and productive ocean lie not just in the food they provide, but also in their regulation of the climate, and even in tourism. Therefore, we are calling on the Government to recognise the need for financial incentives, set out in legislation, to introduce new methods – such as deposit-return schemes (DRS) and a levy on single-use coffee cups – to drive a change in industry practice, consumer behaviour and respect for our broader environment.

Summary of key points

This document acts as a statement, and sets out in summary the key messages that many in the environmental NGO sector share in response to this inquiry. As such, it provides an overview of the issues and solutions as we see them.

In responding to this inquiry, Link is primarily concerned with marine environmental protection, and breaks the issue down into clear themes:

Impacts on marine environment

- Throwaway plastic packaging, including drinks containers, is a major source of ocean plastics pollution – one of the greatest threats currently facing our oceans. More work is needed to identify exactly how ocean plastics affect human health, but we do know that plastics are found in consumable species all along the food chain.

- Plastic bottles are highly prevalent in beach litter. Link member MCS's annual 'Great British Beach Clean' surveys have shown that plastic drinks bottles are frequently among the top ten litter items found on UK beaches, and that drinks containers overall (e.g. plastic bottles, aluminium cans and glass bottles) are some of the most visible items of litter on a beach. Its 2016 survey revealed that these items made up around 10% of the litter found on beaches in England, 11% in Wales and 8% in Scotland.

- Coffee cups are not only made from card and polyethylene, but can also be made of polystyrene. Polystyrene easily fragments in the marine environment, so **we are calling for a complete ban on all polystyrene cups, containers and utensils.**

- Marine plastics pollution is negatively affecting more than 800 animal species and causing serious losses to many countries' economies. It poses a global threat to marine biodiversity due to its increasing abundance, widespread distribution and persistence in the marine environment.

- The impacts of larger 'macroplastics' on marine wildlife include ingestion and choking, or entanglement, causing serious physical injury and even death. The less immediately visible – but no less damaging – 'microplastics' (derived from the breakdown of macroplastics or as purposefully-sized objects known collectively as 'microbeads') are also a cause for concern, since their small size (typically <5mm) means that they can be ingested by organisms throughout the marine food chain, or adsorb harmful chemicals *in situ*.

- Studies have now documented the ingestion of microplastics by a range of fauna, including seabirds, marine mammals, fish (both pelagic and demersal species), invertebrates (including plankton, suspension and filter feeders, many of which perform vital ecosystem functions and are important in commercial fisheries) and even corals.

Reuse and Recycling

- Over the last few years, UK recycling rates for plastic bottles have plateaued at around 57% of total wastes. Industry concerns over the costs of meeting the Government's 2016-2020 targets have forced them to be watered down.

- Plastic bottles are generally made of polyethylene terephthalate (PET) – a material known to be easily recyclable – meaning that a large proportion of recyclable material ends up either in landfill or the environment. Collection and recycling rates are failing to keep up with the phenomenal growth rate in their manufacture.

- Single-use coffee cups are, however, currently difficult to recycle, with very few (currently just two in the UK) facilities able to recycle them. This means that the vast majority end up in landfill, and reports have shown that, in the UK, less than one in 400 (<1%) coffee cups are recycled. This generates an estimated 25,000 tonnes of waste from these sources every year.

- Truly biodegradable alternatives made of plant materials are now available, and **their use should be encouraged by the Government**.

- Although coffee retail brands are seeking to improve recycling rates, there are presently insufficient commitments to increase the use of reusable cups. Retailers should commit to ensuring all 'drink-in' beverages are served in reusable containers, promote reuse for 'take-away' beverages and phase out single-use non-recyclable plastics (including packaging and utensils), with the provision of recycling facilities for all cups and packaging in-store. For this to be effective, there must be collaboration across the supply chain in order to ensure that this type of waste is actually recycled.

- We would like to see the Government support action to reduce coffee cup waste by **implementing a charge on single-use cups in order to incentivise customers to use reusable cups for 'take-away' beverages.**

Circular economy

- The UK **should adopt equivalent or stronger measures** to prevent waste and reduce sources of marine plastics pollution to those agreed in the EU Circular Economy Package, including ongoing revisions to the Waste Directives and the forthcoming Strategy on Plastics in the Circular Economy.

- In line with the waste hierarchy and the development of a circular economy, waste prevention and reuse should be a primary focus of any sustainability policies. Single-use cups, plastic bottles and other fast food packaging are commonly littered items, generate large volumes of waste and represent an unnecessary use of finite resources. **We therefore call for stronger commitments from industry on achieving higher rates of reuse.**

Deposit-return schemes (DRS)

- Despite increased kerbside recycling capacity and years of anti-littering campaigns, recycling rates in the UK are now increasing only very slowly. Clearly, further actions and incentives are needed.

- A 2005 study for Defra concluded that the introduction of a UK-wide DRS could reduce plastic bottle litter by around 80%.

- The biggest soft drinks companies are responsible for collectively selling over two million tonnes of plastic bottles every year, globally, but have inadequate targets and measures in place to reduce their plastics footprint. We need stronger corporate responsibility and action to phase out throwaway plastic bottles, innovate and design reusable models, use 100% recycled plastics for the remainder of packaging, and reverse industry opposition to DRS.

- UK Government action is currently too weak to protect our environment from the blight of throwaway packaging. We are therefore strongly supportive of DRS for all drinks containers being rolled out across the UK, given their international track record of boosting collection rates, public support and endorsement from waste management and recycling firms (such as Suez), SMEs and multinational companies (including larger companies such as Coca-Cola UK).

- Studies and global best practice have proven that DRS can reduce the volume of littered drinks containers and create a more reliable supply of high-quality recycled materials. For example, DRS has pushed the collection and recycling rate to around

95% in several countries across Europe, including Germany, Norway and the Netherlands.

- DRS attribute monetary value to items typically considered worthless, thereby incentivising consumer action and raising awareness. DRS also bring into play extended producer responsibility, helping to ensure that producers of drinks containers play an active role in their correct disposal, reuse and recycling.

- Local Authorities in the UK spend more than £15 million each year cleaning up our beaches; DRS can help to bring this down by reducing operating and logistical costs. They would also help to reduce carbon emissions from collection vehicles since a significant percentage of low density, bulky material would no longer need to be collected at the kerbside.

Concluding remarks

Link sincerely hopes that the Committee will consider the views set out in this document, as well as submissions from its members, in setting the scope for further action on this issue. We expect the Committee to look objectively and holistically at all the evidence it receives, and to use it to propose its own avenues for further enquiry.

We also encourage the UK Government to introduce broader resource efficiency measures through domestic legislation. Building on its recent work to support a ban on microbeads in personal care and cosmetic products, and on the introduction of a Blue Belt of UK MPAs, the Government is in an excellent position to demonstrate responsible global leadership in tackling marine plastics pollution, upon which it must act urgently and decisively.

END OF REPORT