

## P-05-822 Ban plastic straws (for milk) in schools

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### Research Briefing:

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Petition number: P-05-822

Petition title: Ban plastic straws (when drinking milk) in our schools

Text of petition: We call on the National Assembly for Wales to urge the Welsh Government to consider banning the use of plastic straws which are used to drink milk in our schools. As a large school we receive around 285 milk bottles (in the Foundation Phase) daily including the same number of straws. Bearing in mind the global campaign to reduce plastic waste, we feel that plastic straws have a detrimental effect on our environment, especially as that they are used once and then thrown away. If this practice continues, it could lead to the possibility of there being more plastic than fish in our seas by 2050. The fact is that all these straws contribute significantly to the pollution of our seas and endangers wildlife.

### Background

Single use plastics, or disposable plastics, are designed to be used once and thrown away or recycled. They are typically items such as plastic bottles, drinking straws, coffee cups and take-away food packaging. Recent media coverage, notably the [BBC Blue Planet II](#) series, has highlighted the scale of plastic debris in our oceans as a result of our 'throw-away' culture. The impact of single use plastic on the marine environment is evidenced by its prevalence in beach litter surveys. The [Marine Conservation Society's](#) 2017 [Beachwatch](#) Report showed "tiny bits of plastic were the most commonly found item" on beaches across the UK.

A 2017 report [Single Use Plastic and the Marine Environment](#) by [Eunomia](#) for [Seas at Risk](#), calculated the quantity of 'on-the-go' single use plastic waste "as these are most likely to escape normal waste collection systems". Key findings from the research include:

- many of these items either do not need to be made from plastic (e.g. glass and paper alternatives exist), while others are used unnecessarily e.g. drinking straws;
- measures to reduce plastic consumption enjoy a high level of public support, which increases after the measures are implemented;

- solutions to reduce consumption of single-use plastics exist, and have been running in multiple places around the world; and
- drastically reducing consumption of key single-use plastic items would effectively eliminate a major source of marine pollution in all of Europe's seas.

A 2018 report by Eunomia, commissioned by the Welsh Government, [Options for Extended Producer Responsibility in Wales](#), estimated that “a total of 404 million straws [are] consumed annually” in Wales, and “this is equivalent to waste arisings of approximately 150 tonnes of material.” It continued:

Drinking straws are typically constructed from polypropylene, which is recyclable, however very little separation of these items for recycling takes place. Without further data we have made the assumption that the recycling rates for these products is similar to that for disposable cups at 5%, and therefore 7.5 tonnes of straws are recycled per annum in Wales.

The report estimates the end of life costs of a number of single-use items in Wales. The ‘Total Municipal Residual Cost’ of plastic straw use in Wales is estimated at £22,566, a cost of 0.01p per item. However due to the ‘on-the-go’ nature of straws, an estimated 13 tonnes of plastic straws are littered per annum, this is estimated to cost £29,430, a cost of 0.08p per item.

[Extended Producer Responsibility](#) (EPR), as introduced by the [EU Waste Framework Directive](#), is a way of encouraging producers to consider the post-consumer phase of a product's lifecycle by giving them responsibility for it. Applying an EPR approach to school milk supply would involve encouraging producers to minimise waste in packaging design.

## **Mechanisms in schools**

Local authorities are responsible for procuring milk (and its packaging) from suppliers.

Schools participating in the free school milk scheme can offer free milk to Foundation Phase children and subsidised milk to learners in Key Stage 2. At Foundation Phase, the European Community pays a subsidy and the Welsh Government pay a top up subsidy. For pupils at Key Stage 2, the Welsh Government subsidises the cost of school milk alongside the European Community. Schools, local authorities, suppliers or other organisations can claim for the subsidy. Eligible pupils may receive up to 250ml of subsidised milk products each school day.

School milk suppliers may provide milk to schools in large bottles which the school would then distribute to pupils (in beakers), or may be provided in individual portions which may be packaged in cartons which often have a straw, in a plastic sleeve, attached, or straws may be provided separately by the supplier.

## Welsh Government action

In a [written statement](#) on 27 September 2017, the then Cabinet Secretary for Environment and Rural Affairs, Lesley Griffiths AM, stated that “as a Government we accept more needs to be done to improve our recycling rate still further and tackle litter and the issues associated with a ‘throw away’ society and ‘disposable’ culture”. She suggested that, in order to address this issue, the aim should be to “prevent litter entering the environment in the first place”, and “to value the resources we all too often take for granted”. She announced the Eunomia study into EPR (above) to assess possible options, saying:

I have commissioned a study to assess possible interventions to increase waste prevention, increase recycling and reduce land and marine based litter. Producer responsibility schemes such as the current schemes in place in the UK will be included in the research. Deposit Return Schemes will also be included. The research will also assess the likely environmental, economic and social impacts of potential extended producer responsibility (EPR) schemes, including any potential unintended consequences

In a Welsh Government statement delivered in Plenary on [27 February 2018](#), the Minister for the Environment, Hannah Blythyn AM, discussed the Welsh Government’s action on single use plastics:

And we have secured Wales’ involvement in the UK Government’s call for evidence about how it will address the issue of single use plastics, including through the use of tax.

Alongside this, we will continue to work on a potential standalone disposable plastics tax for Wales.

In a Welsh Government statement delivered in Plenary on [8 May 2018](#), the Minister for the Environment announced the outcomes of the EPR study. She said:

I am considering amendments to the Producer Responsibility Obligations Regulations so that producers and retailers pay a larger share of waste management costs.

... We continue to work with HM Treasury on a UK single-use plastics tax.

...I can announce that the Welsh Government has signed up to WRAP UK’s Plastics Pact.

She also announced ways in which the Welsh Government are working to “practice what we preach”:

I am committed to ensuring Welsh Government offices are single-use plastic free by the end of this Assembly term...

...We do not use plastic straws, stirrers or cutlery in our canteens. In addition, Welsh Government will continue to influence the broader public sector in Wales – for example through ‘catering disposables’ procurement contracts across the Welsh Government estate, working with Value Wales.

In Plenary on [13 June 2018](#), in response to a question from the Conservative Party spokesperson David Melding AM, the Minister for the Environment said the Welsh Government was working alongside the National Procurement Service to:

develop a range of measures that allow us to identify trends and actions to help reduce the use of plastics, including things like straws within the public sector, particularly within schools

## National Assembly for Wales action

The Petitions Committee considered a [previous petition](#) on banning polystyrene packaging between 2014 and 2016. Following the response from the then Cabinet Secretary for Environment and Rural Affairs, Lesley Griffiths AM, to the Committee, agreed that there was little more that the Committee could do to take the issue forward and agreed to close the petition.

In Plenary on [23 January 2018](#), in response to a statement from the Cabinet Secretary for Energy, Planning and Rural Affairs, Lesley Griffiths AM, on the food and drink industry, Joyce Watson AM highlighted the [‘Ditch the Straw’](#) campaign. The Cabinet Secretary responded:

The plastic straws initiative is so simple, but it's so important... So, just small things like changing from plastic to paper—because we know people want to use straws—could save so much.

In Plenary on [12 June 2018](#), Joyce Watson AM asked “whether the Welsh Government would consider looking at stopping or indeed reducing the supply of those types of straws through its public procurement policy”.

In response, the Leader of the House, Julie James AM replied:

We have got Value Wales and the National Procurement Service working closely with the Future Generations Commissioner for Wales's office and WRAP to develop and deliver several pilots in conjunction with local authorities and partners across Wales to demonstrate new approaches in procurement that fully embrace the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015, and one of those pilots covers the plastic straws issue. Officials are looking to see what we can do to develop a range of measures to identify trends and implement actions to reduce or eliminate the use of plastics, including food packaging and straws, in our contracts in the future.

Every effort is made to ensure that the information contained in this briefing is correct at the time of publication. Readers should be aware that these briefings are not necessarily updated or otherwise amended to reflect subsequent changes.