

Ban Single Use Plastic Items in Wales

Y Pwyllgor Deisebau | 25 Medi 2018
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Research Briefing:

Petition number: P-05-829

Petition title: Ban Single Use Plastic Items in Wales

Text of petition: We call on the Welsh Assembly to ban all single use plastic items within Wales; It is estimated that the UK and US alone throw away around 550 million plastic straws every day. Although each one is used for an average of just 20 minutes, they take centuries to break down. During a clean-up organised by the Marine Conservation Society last year, an average of 138 pieces of food and drink-related waste were found on every 100m of UK beaches. This needs to stop and the environment needs to become a priority.

Background

Single use plastics, or disposable plastics, are designed to be used once and thrown away or recycled. They include 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. 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, on [Options for Extended Producer Responsibility in Wales](#), estimates 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 continues:

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 it also says that 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.

Single use plastic tax

The [aim](#) of a tax on single use plastic would be to encourage a reduction in its use. Waste policy (including recycling) is a devolved issue. As such, the UK Government develops policy for England and it is for the devolved administrations to develop and implement their own policies and approach, within the framework of the EU requirements. The Welsh Government's [Towards Zero Waste strategy](#) (2010) sets out its policy in this area.

A tax on single use plastic would be in keeping with Welsh Government's Towards Zero Waste Strategy by delivering on ministerial priorities toward developing a ‘[circular economy](#)’, where plastics never become waste and contribute positively to the economy.

Carrier bag charge

Reducing consumption of single use plastic through taxation has already been delivered in Wales through [The Single Use Carrier Bags Charge \(Wales\) Regulations 2010](#). On 1 October 2011 Wales became the first country in the UK to introduce a statutory requirement to charge on most single use carrier bags. Since then, Scotland, Northern Ireland and England have brought in similar approaches of charging shoppers a minimum of 5p per carrier bag used.

Originally the Welsh Government published a voluntary agreement which encouraged retailers to donate their net proceeds to good causes. However the [Environment \(Wales\) Act 2016](#) now requires retailers to donate their net proceeds from the sale of carrier bags to charitable organisations which relate to environmental protection or improvement and, which directly or indirectly benefit the whole or any part of Wales. This is intended to mitigate against the impact of the use of the carrier bag.

Developments in England

On 11 January 2017, the UK Government published its [25-Year Environment Plan for England](#), outlining ten goals for improving the environment using a ‘natural capital’ approach, including:

Work towards eliminating all avoidable waste by 2050 and all avoidable plastic waste by end of 2042.

A recent Research Service [blog](#) provides an overview of the plan, and discusses how it might impact Wales.

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 [Extended Producer Responsibility](#) (EPR), 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

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government, Mark Drakeford AM, announced in a [Plenary statement](#) on 13 February 2018 that the disposable plastic tax would not be taken forward, a ‘vacant land tax’ having being chosen instead. He said:

UK Government will launch a call for evidence about how it will address the issue of single-use plastics, including through the use of tax. Whatever its merits, that announcement creates, I believe, a roadblock in the path of any Wales-only proposal.

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:

... 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 further Plenary statement on [27 February 2018](#) she also 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 Plenary on [8 May 2018](#) she 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 a number of ways in which the Welsh Government is 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 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

On 5 April 2017, Simon Thomas AM led a [Members Legislative Proposal debate on a Waste Reduction Bill for Wales](#). The motion focused on deposit return schemes, a ban or levy on polystyrene (non-recyclable) packaging and placing new requirements on food producers and retailers to reduce unnecessary packaging.

The proposal received cross-party support, and the motion passed with 34 for, 0 against and 12 abstentions.

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

The Petitions Committee is currently considering the following related petitions:

[P-05-750 For single use items: introduce a Deposit Return System for drink containers and make fast food containers and utensils compostable](#)

[P-05-803 Our natural world is being poisoned by single use plastics...it's time to introduce a tax!](#)

[P-05-822 Ban plastic straws \(when drinking milk\) in our schools](#)

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.

On 30 June 2018 the [Environmental Protection \(Microbeads\) \(Wales\) Regulations 2018](#) came into force in Wales, banning the manufacture and sale of products containing plastic microbeads. In response to the laying of the regulations in [Plenary](#) on 06 June 2018, David Melding AM said;

I do believe this is a welcome and significant step, but it is only the first step. We need a shift in public policy towards the responsible use of plastic products and the banning of single-use plastic products.

The [Climate Change, Environment and Rural Affairs Committee](#) is currently undertaking an [inquiry](#) into microplastic pollution in Welsh rivers.

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.