

Briefing for the Public Petitions Committee

Petition Number: PE01755

Main Petitioner: Stephen Henry

Subject: Ban all single-use plastics across Scotland

Calls on the Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to ban single-use plastics across Scotland.

Background

The petitioner wants the Scottish Government to ban all single-use plastics, with an initial focus on food and drink-related items, including single-use plastic bags, cups, cutlery, straws and give-away toys. The petitioner raises concerns about the volume of plastic being discarded in waterways, with associated impacts for wildlife and potentially human health. The petitioner also highlights action being taken in other countries e.g. France announced a ban on plastic cups, plates and cutlery from 2020.

Impacts of plastics in the environment

Plastics are pervasive in the environment, and microplastics (plastic fragments) have been detected in marine and freshwater environments, food, air and drinking water. A [2019 study by the World Health Organization](#) found that microplastics enter freshwater environments in a number of ways, including from degraded plastic waste. It found that microplastics in drinking-water appear to pose a low concern for human health but noted there is limited available evidence. A small [pilot study in 2018](#) found microplastics in the human stool of all international participants (including one from the UK), and said the effects of microplastics on health requires further study.

A [2015 study by the University of Portsmouth](#) assessed the impact of exposure to microplastics in fish, and states that plastics are rapidly accumulating in landfill and natural habitats, especially the marine environment. Whilst the full impacts of this are not yet understood, marine plastic wastes are estimated to cause the deaths of hundreds of thousands of aquatic vertebrates each year – partly from entanglement or physical damage caused by plastic items, but there are also concerns that ingested plastic may block the digestive system and cause starvation. Experiments conducted demonstrated that fish take up microplastics from water as well as via their diet. Although ingestion does not appear to adversely impact the survival or health of adult fish, there is evidence to support negative changes in larval

fish. There was also evidence that microplastics can transport persistent organic pollutants into the food chain. The study called for longer-term research to more fully evaluate impacts.

A [review of global evidence on marine plastic pollution](#) published in May 2019 found a direct relationship between the proliferation of marine plastic and negative impacts across most ecological subjects studied (including fish, birds and marine mammals). It found clear costs to the economy and wellbeing, particularly relating to the provision of fisheries and aquaculture, recreation, and heritage values. The authors recommend a systematic global research agenda for marine plastics, especially relating to the most vulnerable ecosystem services, and on potential contamination of the human food chain.

EU Single Use Plastics Directive and Circular Economy Package

The [European Strategy for Plastics in a Circular Economy](#) (adopted in 2018) includes an objective to ensure that by 2030 all plastic packaging placed on the EU market is re-usable or easily recycled. The [EU Single Use Plastics Directive](#) was adopted in May 2019 and increases regulation of a number of target product types – including banning the use of single-use plastic plates, cutlery, straws, balloon sticks and cotton buds by 2021. The preamble states that in the EU, 80-85% of marine litter is plastic, with single-use plastic items representing 50% and fishing-related items 27% of the total.

The [EU Circular Economy Package \(CEP\)](#) introduces new recycling targets – an overall recycling rate of 55% by 2025, 60% by 2030 and 65% by 2035. The [Scottish recycling rate was 58.9% in 2017](#) and [the Scottish target is already to recycle 70% of waste by 2025](#). The CEP also sets out specific 2030 targets for packaging, including a 55% target for plastic.

Scottish Government Action

The Scottish Government [supports the EU vision to phase out single-use plastics by 2030](#). The [Programme for Government 2019-2020](#) sets out the Government's ambition to meet or exceed the standards set out in the EU Single Use Plastic Directive. The Government has committed to:

- Introduce a Deposit Return Scheme (DRS) for single-use drinks containers – [draft Regulations have been published](#) for consultation.
- Consult on raising the single-use carrier bag charge from 5p to 10p.
- Take further action by “banning more problematic single use plastic items, such as cutlery, plates and food and drink containers, by 2021”.
- Consult on proposals for a Circular Economy Bill, embedding a new approach to reducing, reusing and recycling materials. The provisions in the Bill will enable charges to be applied to items such as single-use cups.
- Update the Marine Litter Strategy in 2020.

Regulations are also due to be laid in the Scottish Parliament [to ban the sale of plastic-stemmed cotton buds](#), and [The Environmental Protection](#)

[\(Microbeads\) \(Scotland\) Regulations 2018](#) entered into force in June 2018, banning the sale of rinse-off personal care products containing microbeads.

Further policies on reducing waste and increasing recycling are set out in the [Scottish Government's Circular Economy Strategy, 'Making Things Last'](#). It does not contain specific policies on single-use plastic, but includes a number of policies designed to promote waste prevention and product re-use.

Expert Panel on Environmental Charging and Other Measures

The Scottish Government appointed an [Expert Panel on Environmental Charging and Other Measures](#) in 2018 to provide advice to Ministers on charges or other measures which may be adopted to move towards a circular economy. It is focussing on single-use items and was initially tasked with looking at disposable cups. Its initial report in July 2019 recommended:

- A mandatory charge for single-use disposable beverage cups in combination with ambitious targets for reducing their consumption (expected to be introduced via the Circular Economy Bill).
- Concerted action at national and local level to tackle Scotland's throwaway culture, including social marketing measures to raise awareness.

UK-wide measures: plastic tax and packaging producer responsibility

Waste is a devolved matter, but some aspects of waste management and producer responsibility for waste are currently undertaken at a UK-level. In 2018, [the UK Government announced that it would introduce a new tax](#) on the production and import of plastic packaging with less than 30% recycled content, subject to consultation. The UK Government issued a call for evidence and [consulted in February 2019](#) on how the tax could work. The consultation states that the tax would be UK-wide, but the UK Government is engaging closely with devolved administrations on its design. The UK Government also [consulted on reforming UK-wide Packaging Producer Responsibility regulations](#) in February 2019, with the aim of encouraging businesses to design and use plastic packaging that is easier to recycle, by requiring them to take greater responsibility for the environmental impact of their products and for costs of managing packaging at end of life.

Voluntary initiatives

There are a number of voluntary initiatives aimed at changing the way that plastics are designed, used and disposed of. Examples include the [UK Plastics Pact](#), a collaboration of businesses in the plastics supply chain (including supermarkets, retailers and manufacturers), which has set a target to eliminate unnecessary single-use plastic packaging, for all plastic packaging to be re-usable, recyclable or compostable and for 70% to be

recycled or composted by 2025. The Scottish Government is a signatory to the Pact, led by the charity WRAP.

Scottish Parliament Action

[PE01636: Require single use drinks cups to be biodegradable](#) (lodged 20 February 2017), calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to introduce legislation requiring that all single use drinks cups be 100% biodegradable. This petition was referred to the Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform (ECCLR) Committee and is due to be considered taking into account the report of the Expert Panel on Environmental Charges.

Chamber questions on Single-use Plastic Packaging (Elimination). The ECCLR Cabinet Secretary [answered questions about the elimination of single-use plastics in the Chamber on 09 May 2019](#) and referred to

- Plans for a deposit return scheme for single-use drinks containers, expected to play an important role in efforts to increase recycling of plastic.
- The UK-wide consultation on packaging producer responsibility as an “important development”.
- The expert panel on environmental charging having an important role to play in shaping future plans.

DRS - The ECCLR Committee [agreed its approach to consideration of the proposed draft regulations](#) on the deposit return scheme on 3 September 2019. The Committee will issue a call for evidence and invite stakeholders to submit views.

Marine litter/environmental charging: As part of its [work programme, the ECCLR Committee](#) agreed to seek an update from the Scottish Government on its marine litter strategy and approach to marine plastics to inform potential further work on marine litter. As part of its financial scrutiny, the Committee is also considering the use of tax powers and charging to improve environmental outcomes and has considered the effectiveness of the carrier bag charge.

Alexa Morrison
Senior Researcher
16 September 2019

SPICe research specialists are not able to discuss the content of petition briefings with petitioners or other members of the public. However, if you have any comments on any petition briefing you can email us at spice@parliament.scot

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

Published by the Scottish Parliament Information Centre (SPICe), an office of the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body, The Scottish Parliament, Edinburgh, EH99 1SP