

P-05-803 Single Use Plastic Tax

Y Pwyllgor Deisebau | 13 Mawrth 2018

Petitions Committee | 13 March 2018

Research Briefing:

Petition number: P-05-803

Petition title: Our natural world is being poisoned by single use plastics...it's time to introduce a tax!

Text of petition: The evidence is there for those who want to see...our addiction to single use 'throw away' plastic is poisoning our natural world.

Sea birds are eating plastics, fish are eating plastics, shell fish are eating plastics and we, therefore, are eating plastics.

The production of single use plastics are increasing year upon year, yet only 9% of plastics are recycled in the world.

Since large scale production of plastics began in the 1950s, we have produced 8.3 billion tonnes...equivalent to the weight of one billion African elephants! And that figure is expected to reach 34 billion tonnes by 2050!!

None of this plastic has biodegraded over this time, it's just got smaller and smaller, making it nearly impossible to remove!

We urge the Welsh Government to introduce a tax on all single use plastics similar to the very successful 5p charge on single use carrier bags.

It's time to take action.

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.

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 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. 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 purposes 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.

In 2016 the Welsh Government published a [Post Implementation Review of the Single Use Carrier Bag Charge in Wales: Emerging Findings Report](#). The review found that:

- single use carrier bag use has declined by 71% since the change was introduced;

- a rise in the use of 'bags for life' and other reusable bags has meant an overall reduction in all bags of 57%;
- the net benefit of the single use carrier bag charge was between £28 million and £32 million; and
- as a result of the donations to good causes, it has been estimated that social benefits of between £27 million and £35 million have accrued through environmental, health and employment benefits.

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.

Developments in China

Wales exported over 40,000 tonnes of waste last year to be recycled ([Plenary](#), 09 January 2018). A European Commission document [A European Strategy for Plastics in a Circular Economy](#) states "More than 85 % of the exported plastic waste is currently shipped to China". China's decision to impose tighter waste import controls, including stopping the import of plastic waste for recycling, forces Wales to be more proactive in reducing consumption of single use plastics.

[WRAP UK](#) explores what impact these restrictions will have for the UK in an [Open Letter on China's Waste Import Restrictions](#).

Welsh Government action

On 14 March 2017, in response to a [plenary debate on recycling](#), the Cabinet Secretary for Communities and Children, Carl Sargeant AM, stated "a more radical approach like... additional charges or preventing the use of single-use food and drink containers" would be considered as part of the Towards Zero Waste policy refresh to be undertaken in 2018

In a [written statement](#) on 27 September 2017, the 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 "to value the resources we all too often take for granted". She announced a 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 Minister for the Environment, Hannah Blythyn AM, answered questions from Members in [Plenary](#) on 17 January 2018 on the subject of plastic packaging, where she indicated the Welsh Government were awaiting the outcome of the EPR study before deciding how to proceed. The First Minister confirmed in [Plenary](#) on 09 January 2018 the outcome of the EPR study "...will report in February". At the time of writing this briefing the study had not been published.

The Welsh Government recently considered a disposable plastic tax as one of four [potential new taxes](#) to be introduced under the new powers contained in the [Wales Act 2017](#). The Welsh Government's [tax policy report](#) gives more detail on the shortlisting.

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 been 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 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.

Following a 2016 [UK wide consultation](#) on banning the manufacture and sale of microbeads, a type of micro plastic, in wash-off cosmetics, the Welsh Government has [consulted](#) on how the ban should be carried out in Wales. In particular the consultation considered how the ban could be implemented and enforced in Wales. The consultation ended on 8 January 2018, the [summary of responses](#) document sets out the next steps:

If the Welsh Ministers approve the legislation the ban on the manufacture and sale of products containing plastic microbeads will come into effect from 30 June 2018.

More information on microbeads can be found in a 2017 Research Service [blog](#).

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.

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.