

POSITION STATEMENT

Single Use Plastics



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Single Use Plastics

What are Single Use Plastics?

Many plastics are used just once and then discarded, often ending up as litter or in the ocean. Plastics play a prominent role in our society, and it can be hard to tell which plastics are designed to be used just once, but items such as plastic bags, drink bottles, takeaway packaging, coffee cup lids, plastic cutlery, drinking straws and most food packaging are usually discarded after a single use. They constitute roughly 50% of all plastics produced.¹ It is important to keep in mind that some of these single use plastics are reusable or recyclable (e.g. drinks bottles) whilst others are not (e.g. drinking straws).

Developing our position

Keep Northern Ireland Beautiful is delighted with the recent increase in public awareness of the impact of single use plastics and welcomes the wider debate that is taking place across the European Union and locally in Northern Ireland. We have engaged with policy-makers, voluntary groups, businesses and other relevant organisations about this issue and its impact across Northern Ireland.

We have also been keeping abreast of the moves being made by the European Union, the British Government and the Irish Government on this issue. In the absence of a devolved government in Northern Ireland, we have also been monitoring the moves at local council level to tackle this issue.

We have reviewed information available within the European Union and across the United Kingdom about the issue of single use plastics. We believe that specific measures need to be taken to tackle this environmental issue. Northern Ireland is not isolated from the damage that plastic can cause and we cannot afford to delay taking action, whilst the rest of the world acts around us.²

We believe in government-led action that can help promote awareness of the issue whilst also encouraging those who produce many of these items to find and employ alternatives. We believe that with a collaborative

approach between various stakeholders in society that we can make sustainable progress. We recognise that change will not happen overnight and that many plastic items are used daily by many people, however we believe that our goals in seeking change must be both ambitious and achievable.

Through our own research with the annual Cleaner Neighbourhoods Report³ and the Marine Little Report,⁴ we have been able to track the increasing problem that single use plastics are causing locally.

Northern Ireland led on implementing the Carrier Bag levy, which has achieved substantive results in a short period of time.⁵ We believe that on this issue, we can become leaders again.

As we leave the European Union, we would argue that the same provisions outlined in the EU Directive on Single Use Plastics should be continued after our exit and the goals set out must be maintained.⁶ Furthermore, we believe that Northern Ireland can also place a greater emphasis on behaviour change and civic engagement that places the onus on members of the public who drop litter. However, there is also a strong imperative on manufacturers to design products which can either be reused or recycled to avoid single use plastics across all sectors.

¹ <https://lessplastic.co.uk/>

² <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/science-environment-44359614>

³ <https://keepnorthernirelandbeautiful.etinu.net/cgi-bin/generic?instanceID=48>

⁴ <https://keepnorthernirelandbeautiful.etinu.net/cgi-bin/generic?instanceID=50>

⁵ <https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/articles/northern-ireland-carrier-bag-levy-statistics>

⁶ https://ec.europa.eu/commission/news/single-use-plastics-2018-may-28_en

Consumption of Single Use Plastics

The use of single use plastics is intrinsically linked with their entry into the waste stream. The table below shows data on the consumption of key single use plastics for the UK and how its consumption per product *per capita* ranks compared to the other EU28 Member States.⁷

Of the dozen common single use plastics listed in the table, the UK ranks in the top two consumers for nine of the products and only falls out of the top ten for cigarette filters, bringing our overall position to fifth out of 28 countries.

Consumption of key single use plastics in the UK and how the per capita consumption ranks across the EU Member States

Product	Consumption (2018), billion items	Ranking within EU28 based on consumption per capita
Cotton buds	13.2	1
Sanitary towels	4.1	1
Crisp packets	8.3	2
Wet wipes	10.8	2
Cutlery	16.5	2
Straws	42.0	2
Stirrers	44.1	2
Drinks cups and lids	4.1	2
Food containers	5.2	2
Sweet wrappers	6.0	8
Drinks bottles	10.1	9
Cigarette filters	45.8	25
Total	210.2	5

⁷ <http://www.eunomia.co.uk/reports-tools/a-plastic-future-plastics-consumption-and-waste-management-in-the-uk/>

Action at Government Level on Single Use Plastics

Northern Ireland - With no Executive there has been no movement at a devolved level to pursue this issue. However, at a local government level there have been moves to take on this issue. In November 2017, Ards and North Down Borough Council adopted a motion to end the use of single use plastics.⁸ In January 2018, Belfast City Council passed a motion seeking to eliminate the use of single use plastics in Council meetings.⁹

United Kingdom - In March 2018, the Environment Secretary announced plans to ban the sale of plastic straws, cotton buds, and drinks stirrers. The government also announced a new £61 million fund to examine new ways of clearing up plastics.¹⁰

European Union - In May 2018, the European Commission proposed a directive to reduce the impact of certain plastic products on the environment. The proposals seek to tackle the most commonly found items of plastic waste with measures to tackle food packaging, cotton buds, straws and plates. There is also a focus on producer responsibility with a drive for firms to help raise awareness and conduct clean-ups. The proposals contain a target of a 90% collection rate for plastic bottles by 2025 via a deposit return scheme or a green dot scheme.¹¹

Our Position

At Keep Northern Ireland Beautiful, we believe that:

- Plastic as a material is useful and extremely difficult to avoid. It has become an essential component of our everyday lives.
- As a product of non-renewable fossil fuels, reducing the amount of plastic being used is of significant importance in efforts to tackle climate change.
- More effort is needed to make the plastic that is produced a reusable or recyclable.
- Not enough plastic items are made of fully recyclable materials and not enough of an effort is being made to make all plastics recyclable. Simple changes in manufacturing and use of differing (and a smaller variety of) plastics could have major positive impacts on recycling rates.
- Too much plastic is being sent to landfill or dropped as litter on our streets and in our seas.
- Much of the single use plastics found as litter could be avoided and we support all efforts being made to reduce the amount of single use plastics in circulation throughout Northern Ireland.
- Drastically reducing the amount of single-use plastics being used would have a hugely beneficial effect on the amount of marine and terrestrial litter.

Our Recommendations

- Governmental institutions need to lead the way on formulating a coherent litter strategy and action plan with meaningful and ambitious targets.
- Targets to reduce the production and consumption of plastics, like the Plastic Bags Directive, should be introduced for all major types of single use plastics.
- Maintain the minimum EU standards announced in May 2018 and continue to at least match EU environmental standards.
- A Deposit Return Scheme should be researched, taking into account geographic variations to determine the most cost-effective solution. Whilst such systems are known to increase the levels of recycling and recapture and reduce the number of plastic bottles ending up as litter, we need to weigh costs against alternative solutions including those centred on behaviour change and ensure that a coherent programme involving several means is in place and support ongoing

⁸ <https://www.belfastlive.co.uk/news/ards-north-down-council-bans-13997348>

⁹ <https://allianceparty.org/article/2018/0011510/mcreynolds-council-must-reduce-plastic-waste-1>

¹⁰ https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/690293/PU2154_Call_for_evidence_plastics_web.pdf

¹¹ http://ec.europa.eu/environment/waste/pdf/single-use_plastics_factsheet.pdf

- Producer responsibility should be extended to include litter prevention activities and a proportionate contribution towards clean-up costs.
- Sending plastics to landfill should only be done as a last resort, as per the waste hierarchy laid out in the EU's Waste Framework Directive.
- Local councils should introduce a ban on all single use plastics at meetings and public events and then seek to extend their influence to the high street and beyond.
- Data on the production and use of single use plastics should be made openly available to aid reduction efforts.

Our Actions

- Annual Cleaner Neighbourhood Surveys are carried out to monitor overall levels of litter on our streets and open spaces. The data goes into an annual report and is published online.
- Quarterly Marine Litter Surveys are carried out on ten beaches across Northern Ireland. The resulting annual report is posted out to every Councillor in Northern Ireland and published online. The data is also sent to the OSPAR Commission.
- Funding has been requested from local government to engage in a litter categorisation programme, where specific litter types (e.g. plastic straws, branded coffee cups etc.) are identified, recorded and weighed, so as to better understand the composition of both our litter waste streams and public bin waste.
- Funding has also been requested for a 'WhatSUP?' initiative, designed specifically to reduce the volume of single use plastic being produced, used and littered in Northern Ireland. It would challenge schools, businesses, local authorities and the general public to avoid single use plastics, demand alternatives and dispose of/recycle any plastics in a responsible way.

Conclusion

Single use plastics have recently become much more prominent issue. Across Northern Ireland more can be done to tackle this issue at all levels of society. Keep Northern Ireland Beautiful believes that by adopting a coordinated approach between government, industry and civic society we can raise awareness of the damage done by these plastics and adopt substantive measures to dramatically reduce their impact on our environment.



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