

# Local Government Association briefing

## Debate on plastic bottles and coffee cups

House of Commons  
26 April 2018



### Key messages

- Waste and recycling are among the most valued services any council provides. They are used by all council taxpayers and represent the third biggest spend item in a council's budget. A doubling of spend by councils to £3.28 billion has seen recycling rates improve 400 per cent in the last decade.<sup>i</sup>
- It is positive that 98 per cent of local authorities currently provide a kerbside collection scheme, which includes plastic bottles. Over half of all councils also provide drop-off points for plastics.<sup>ii</sup> Despite these services, only fifty-seven per cent of all plastic bottles consumed in this country are recycled.<sup>iii</sup>
- We support the Government's ambition to eliminate avoidable plastic waste. Its recent initiatives, including the announcement of a deposit return scheme, are positive.<sup>iv</sup> If the proposals are to be a success, they must work alongside kerbside recycling and not be seen as an alternative to it.
- Disposable coffee cups have a recycling rate of less than one per cent in the UK.<sup>v</sup> Most cups have a plastic coating that must be separated from paper before recycling, which ordinary recycling systems cannot do. A large number of discarded coffee cups end up in landfill, creating an estimated 25,000 tonnes of waste.
- Dealing with non-recyclable coffee cup waste is a significant extra cost to councils. Taxpayers are currently funding around 90 per cent of the costs of packaging waste disposal.<sup>vi</sup> Councils would like to see producers and retailers take greater responsibility for the design of packaging, for example by funding recycling and increasing the recyclable content in coffee cups.
- Some councils are working with charities to pilot schemes to reduce coffee cup waste on-the-go. Initial trials of these schemes have proved successful. Producers and retailers should be encouraged to join localised waste reductions schemes across the country.

# Briefing

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## ***Council waste and recycling services***

Waste and recycling are among the most valued services any council provides. They are used by all council taxpayers and represent the third biggest spend item in a council's budget. A doubling of spend by councils to £3.28 billion has seen recycling rates improve 400 per cent in the last decade.<sup>vii</sup>

The UK is on course to exceed its EU landfill targets as a result of the extensive efforts of local authorities. The country has seen a radical reduction in landfill per household by 78 per cent since 2002/3.<sup>viii</sup>

Overall household rates have risen significantly because of the effort and resources councils have put into kerbside collection. We need all levels of government, retailers and producers to work together to continue to improve the rates of recycling. This should include supporting the funding of recycling services so that the cost of improving facilities does not fall solely on council taxpayers.

The UK will need to review its legal framework for waste and recycling services following the vote to exit the EU.<sup>ix</sup> This is an area of policy where the principle of subsidiarity should apply. Councils want greater local flexibility in how waste is managed according to local choices and priorities.

### ***Plastic bottle waste***

Plastics as a whole make up 8 per cent of all dry recycling, of which bottles are only one part.<sup>x</sup> Of the plastic bottles consumed in this country, 57 per cent of them are currently recycled.<sup>xi</sup>

It is positive that 98 per cent of local authorities currently provide a kerbside collection scheme, which includes plastic bottles. In addition to this, over half of all councils (52 per cent) provide drop-off schemes where plastic bottles can be brought to a drop-off point. The expansion of these schemes over the last 15 years helped to improve plastic recycling rates.

We support the Government's ambition to eliminate all avoidable plastic waste by 2042. Its recent initiatives, including the announcement of a deposit return scheme, are positive.<sup>xii</sup> If the proposals are to be a success, they must work alongside kerbside recycling and not be seen as an alternative to it.

The impacts of deposit return schemes will vary across local authority areas, depending on the local collection system and the volume of litter. Councils will be concerned about losing valuable materials in the recycling stream, as well as having to pick up the costs of returning packaging to retailers. We would like to see councils fully recompensated for any additional costs arising from the schemes.

The different materials within plastics are not easily identified when being sorted for recycling. The value of plastics – the price waste reprocessors will pay local authorities - is highly dependent on how well they have been pre-sorted. In order to effectively sort plastic bottles councils need to pay for additional sorting costs,

therefore there must be a greater financial incentive for councils to collect and sort all plastics for recycling.

To improve the processing of plastic bottles, the Government should give further consideration to how the infrastructure for plastic reprocessing can be supported. We would welcome a discussion with the plastics industry about what measures can be taken to redesign products and packaging to help support the market for reprocessed plastic.

### ***Coffee cup waste***

Disposable coffee cups have a recycling rate of less than one per cent in the UK. The most commonly used coffee cups have a plastic coating that must be separated from paper before recycling, which ordinary paper recycling systems cannot do.

Dealing with non-recyclable coffee cup waste is a significant extra cost to councils. Taxpayers are currently funding around 90 per cent of the costs of packaging waste disposal.<sup>xiii</sup> A large number of discarded coffee cups end up at landfill sites, creating an estimated 25,000 tonnes of waste. There is enough coffee cup waste ending up in landfill each year to fill London's Royal Albert Hall.<sup>xiv</sup>

In some cases, coffee retail chains are making recycling more difficult for councils because the coffee cup materials are getting mixed up with the paper that many householders have taken time and trouble over collecting, resulting in more waste going to landfill.

The hard work of councils in improving recycling rates is being hindered by a lack of recyclable paper cups. Councils are working hard to tackle the challenges of recycling coffee cups but would like to see producers and retailers take greater initiative. The industry has shown signs of heading in the right direction on this issue, but it needs to go further, faster and demonstrate positive and immediate action in developing recyclable cups.

Local authorities have a major role to play in supporting high streets and small businesses. Councils are well placed to work with independent local retailers who want to play their part in recycling disposable packaging. Central government can support this by ensuring that councils have the tools and flexibility to work directly with smaller retailers to help them find affordable recycling solutions.

Some councils are working with charities to pilot schemes to reduce coffee cup waste on-the-go. Initial trials of these schemes have proved successful. Producers and retailers should be encouraged to join localised waste reductions schemes across the country.

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- <sup>i</sup> DEFRA, Local authority collected waste management - annual results  
(<https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/local-authority-collected-waste-management-annual-results>)
- <sup>ii</sup> Local Government Association member survey
- <sup>iii</sup> [Recoup UK Households Plastics Collection Survey 2016](#)
- <sup>iv</sup> DEFRA, Deposit return scheme in fight against plastic, March 2018  
(<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/deposit-return-scheme-in-fight-against-plastic>)
- <sup>v</sup> Environmental Audit Committee, 2<sup>nd</sup> report of session 2017-19, Disposable Packaging: Coffee Cups  
(<https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201719/cmselect/cmenvaud/657/657.pdf>)
- <sup>vi</sup> Environmental Audit Committee, 2<sup>nd</sup> report of session 2017-19, Disposable Packaging: Coffee Cups
- <sup>vii</sup> DEFRA, Local authority collected waste management - annual results  
(<https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/local-authority-collected-waste-management-annual-results>)
- <sup>viii</sup> DEFRA, Local authority collected waste management - annual results
- <sup>ix</sup> [DEFRA statistics on waste managed by local authorities in England in 2015 to 2016](#)
- <sup>ix</sup> [Recoup UK Households Plastics Collection Survey 2016](#)
- <sup>ix</sup> DEFRA, Deposit return scheme in fight against plastic, March 2018
- <sup>ix</sup> Environmental Audit Committee, 2<sup>nd</sup> report of session 2017-19, Disposable Packaging: Coffee Cups
- <sup>ix</sup> Environmental Audit Committee, inquiry into disposable packaging, LGA written evidence  
(<http://data.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/committeeevidence.svc/evidencedocument/environmental-audit-committee/packaging/written/49815.pdf>)