

# Local Government Association briefing Debate on the threat to the environment by plastic and the case for improved recycling

House of Lords

15 November 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 in councils' budgets. 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 99 per cent of local authorities currently collect 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 share the Government's ambition to increase recycling and reduce waste. The best way to achieve this is through extended producer responsibility and changes to packaging regulations. Producers, manufacturers and retailers should contribute more towards a circular economy, not local authorities.
- Councils are calling for the reform of packaging content. It was encouraging to see measures in the 2018 Budget that support the greater use of recycled plastics in products and packaging. As the recent National Audit Office (NAO) report highlighted, the current system could do more to incentivise producers.<sup>iv</sup>
- A survey undertaken by the LGA demonstrates that at least a fifth of councils have felt a direct impact from China's restrictions on waste imports.<sup>v</sup> The Government's upcoming Waste and Resources Strategy is an opportunity to rebalance the burden of recycling costs away from councils and taxpayers, and to address the impact of the China import ban.

# 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 councils' budgets. A doubling of spend by councils to £3.28 billion has seen recycling rates improve 400 per cent in the last decade.<sup>vi</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>vii</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>viii</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 waste***

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

It is positive that 99 per cent of local authorities currently collect plastic bottles. Over half of all councils also provide drop-off points for plastics.<sup>xi</sup> 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. Our primary ask is that the Government should limit the types of plastic which can be used in order to make recycling simpler. At the moment there are at least seven different types of plastic which are used to make products and packaging. This complicates the recycling process as each type of plastic needs to be recycled differently and some remain too costly to recycle.

The Government's recent initiatives, such as the 5p plastic bag charge and the commitment to consult on deposit return schemes (DRS), are positive.<sup>xii</sup> If the DRS proposals are to be a success, they must work alongside kerbside recycling and not be seen as an alternative to it.

Councils are calling for the reform of packaging content. It was encouraging to see measures proposed in the 2018 Budget that support the greater use of recycled plastics in products and packaging so that a market is encouraged for these items, and they develop an innate value which helps pull them through their life cycle. The

Government could go further and consider a ban on types of plastic packaging that cannot be recycled. As the recent National Audit Office (NAO) report highlighted, the current system could do more to incentivise producers.<sup>xiii</sup>

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.

### ***Producer responsibility***

Councils would like to see measures which encourage the packaging industry to reduce the amount of unrecyclable material it produces. As the recent National Audit Office (NAO) report highlighted, the current system could do more to incentivise producers to minimise the amount of packaging put into the system.<sup>xiv</sup> Currently producers pay a modest £73 million to the Treasury under the packaging producer responsibility scheme as a contribution towards the costs of dealing with waste.

Local authorities are determined to do all they can to help improve recycling rates, and regularly update residents with information and campaigns to increase the amount of waste that can be recycled. We would like to see the wider industry follow this lead. It could do this by contributing more to recycling and waste management, and by helping to reduce waste at the point of source.

It is also clear that the UK's current system of packaging recycling obligations is reliant on export markets to meet recycling targets. The NAO's report suggests that the Government does not have adequate checks in place to ensure that material exported is actually recycled. In addition to this, there is no guarantee that the established export markets will continue to accept packaging from the UK in the long-term.

A survey of councils undertaken by the LGA demonstrates that at least a fifth of councils have felt a direct impact from China's restrictions on waste imports over the last year.<sup>xv</sup> This is due in part to increased costs for processing materials for recycling. The fee charged to councils to process materials collected from kerbside collection at a materials recovery facility (MRF) is said to have increased from £15 to £22 per tonne over the last year. The fee has increased to £35 a tonne compared with £29 a tonne for contracts signed in the past year.

It is vital that the Government addresses the longer term impact of the China ban in its forthcoming Waste and Resources Strategy. In addition to the Chinese ban,

Malaysia has also imposed a three-month ban on importing scrap plastics. Vietnam is considering its own ban on scrap plastics, which has led to concerns that the cost to taxpayers could increase.

The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) is preparing for major change around the management of waste in order to reach EU targets. There could potentially be significant new sources of funding being made available, which would only be released to councils if they sign up to stringent targets. Defra has indicated that alongside the publication of its Waste and Resources Strategy, it will also announce a set of consultations. These consultations are likely to address the issues of extended producer responsibility (EPR), deposit return schemes (DRS) and targets.

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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> NAO, The packaging recycling obligations, July 2018 (<https://www.nao.org.uk/report/the-packaging-recycling-obligations/#>)

<sup>v</sup> LGA, China waste ban impacting on council recycling and costs, October 2018 (<https://www.local.gov.uk/about/news/china-waste-ban-impacting-council-recycling-services-and-costs>)

<sup>vi</sup> DEFRA, Local authority collected waste management - annual results (<https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/local-authority-collected-waste-management-annual-results>)

<sup>vii</sup> DEFRA, Local authority collected waste management - annual results

<sup>viii</sup> [DEFRA statistics on waste managed by local authorities in England in 2015 to 2016](#)

<sup>viii</sup> [Recoup UK Households Plastics Collection Survey 2016](#)

<sup>viii</sup> DEFRA, Deposit return scheme in fight against plastic, March 2018

<sup>viii</sup> Environmental Audit Committee, 2<sup>nd</sup> report of session 2017-19, Disposable Packaging: Coffee Cups

<sup>viii</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>)

<sup>xi</sup> Local Government Association member survey

<sup>xiii</sup> NAO, The packaging recycling obligations, July 2018 (<https://www.nao.org.uk/report/the-packaging-recycling-obligations/#>)

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<sup>xv</sup> LGA, China waste ban impacting on council recycling and costs, October 2018 (<https://www.local.gov.uk/about/news/china-waste-ban-impacting-council-recycling-services-and-costs>)