



# Tackling the scourge of single-use plastic pollution

Scottish Greens Policy Briefing  
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# Summary

Plastic pollution has become an environmental emergency, both in Scotland and around the world. In particular, the mass consumption of single use plastics is threatening wildlife, littering our beaches and cities, contributing to climate change and placing enormous costs on local governments. We believe that rapid progress could be made in Scotland if bold action is taken by the Scottish Government, leading the way in tackling the scourge of plastic pollution.

This briefing outlines the Scottish Green's policies to achieve this goal by:

1. Urgently banning pointless plastics such as plastic stirrers, cutlery and cotton buds.
2. Phasing out the use of more challenging single-use plastics such as disposable cups by 2025 using a combination of levies, charges and public education.
3. Supporting and encouraging alternatives to useful single-use products that contain plastics and are more challenging to replace, such as nappies and menstrual products.

# The problem with single-use plastics

Single-use plastics are items made either wholly or partly from plastic that are designed to be used only once and for a very short time before being binned. There is a growing awareness of the scale and impacts of plastic pollution on the world's land and oceans. Popular documentary series, such as the BBC's *Blue Planet II*, have highlighted the devastating effects of plastic pollution on marine wildlife and habitats. Growing awareness of the impacts of climate change has sparked a realisation that our current dependency on fossil fuel-based plastics is unsustainable.

Around 3.7m tonnes of plastic is estimated to be used in the UK every year.<sup>1</sup> The bulk of this is packaging waste (59%), of which over two-thirds originates from domestic consumption including food and retail sectors.<sup>2</sup> The majority of consumer waste is from plastic drinks bottles followed by plastic tubs and films.<sup>3</sup>

Once plastics enter waterways and natural environment they can negatively affect wildlife and their habitats. Plastics can be easily washed and blown far away from where they were used and never be recycled. It is estimated that between 10,000 and 26,000 plastic items enter surface waters annually from the UK.<sup>4</sup> One international study in 2015 found that all sea turtle species had eaten marine plastic, with 164 seabirds species and 47 whale species also found to have ingested plastic waste.<sup>5</sup> This pollution can have toxicological effects on animals as well as degrading their habitats.

Inappropriate plastic disposal and confusing guidelines about recycling are also placing strain on public sewage systems, with items such as wet wipes, cotton buds and sanitary items being flushed down toilets and causing blockages which are difficult and expensive to fix.

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1. Waste and Resource Action Programme, 2016. *Plastics: Market Situation Report*, p.5. Available online at <[http://www.wrap.org.uk/sites/files/wrap/Plastics\\_Market\\_Situation\\_Report.pdf#page=5](http://www.wrap.org.uk/sites/files/wrap/Plastics_Market_Situation_Report.pdf#page=5)>

2. *ibid.*

3. *ibid.*

4. Hann, S. et al, 2018. *Reducing Household Contributions to Marine Plastic Pollution: Report for Friends of the Earth*. Available online: <[https://cdn.friendsoftheearth.uk/sites/default/files/downloads/reducing-household-plastics\\_0.pdf](https://cdn.friendsoftheearth.uk/sites/default/files/downloads/reducing-household-plastics_0.pdf)>

5. *ibid.*

Plastic is not only an environmental problem as a form of waste. Our over-reliance on plastic is fuelling our fossil fuel dependency. A study by the Waste and Resources Actions Programme (WRAP) concluded:

**“If all 456,000 tonnes of plastic packaging collected kerbside from UK households in 2013/14... was recycled, it would save almost 400,000 tonnes of CO2 equivalent emissions compared with landfill, which equates to taking 125,000 cars off the roads.”<sup>6</sup>**

In Scotland, the last survey of recycling collections showed around 29,000 tonnes of plastic was collected from the kerbside in 2013/14, amounting to 22,000 bottles; 6,000 tubs, pots and trays; 1,000 pieces of plastic film.<sup>7</sup>

Single-use plastics can take millennia to degrade, but even then it just breaks down into smaller plastic particles that can more easily enter waterways, marine species and other animals.

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6. *Waste and Resources Action Programme, 2016. p.24.*

7. *ibid. p.7.*

## Our vision

We believe Scotland should take the lead in tackling the scourge of pollution caused by single-use plastics. The powers needed to achieve this are largely devolved and being a leader on this issue is not only the right thing to do, but it will create opportunities for innovative Scottish businesses to develop sustainable alternatives to single-use plastics.

With the right policy levers in place, we could see a dramatic reduction in the use of single-use plastics within the next decade. The Scottish Greens support a range of policies that would deliver an end to the use of single-use plastic items by 2025. An exception is made for essential plastics that cannot be easily replaced, such as those used for medical purposes.

Shifting away from single-use plastics would bring about a transformation in our day-to-day lives. By making choices to switch to reusable water bottles, coffee cups and paper cotton buds or straws, we can reduce a large amount of the waste we send to landfill. Installing free public water taps in our town centres and cities would make it easier to refill water bottles when on the go and lower demand for single-use plastic bottles.

As society's focus shifts to seeing plastic as a reusable resource rather than a disposable product, greater emphasis could be placed on reusing and repairing items made from plastic. Greater support for repair skill-share projects could give more people the know-how to repair their plastic appliances.

The Scottish Greens believe a waste hierarchy approach should be applied to the problem of plastic pollution. This would classify the single-use plastics we encounter everyday into categories from unnecessary to essential, with policy measures to reduce their use or create viable alternatives.

# Pointless plastics that should be banned

Given the urgency of addressing plastic pollution, we are calling for the retail of pointless plastics to be banned as soon as possible. We define pointless plastics as plastics that are single-use, non-essential and can either be easily replaced by a non-plastic or reusable alternative or would not be missed.

Examples of pointless plastics include:

## Plastic cotton buds

Cotton buds are a major source of marine plastic pollution in Scotland and are consistently reported in the top ten list of items found in Scottish beach cleans organised by Marine Conservation Society (MCS). Voluntary initiatives to encourage consumers to dispose of them responsibly have had limited impact. Cotton buds that are paper-based are already available and a ban would therefore have a low impact on consumers. There are already plans to ban plastic-stemmed cotton buds in Scotland, but Greens would like to see this legislation broadened out to cover more pointless plastics such as drinks stirrers and single-use cutlery.

## Plastic plates and cutlery

Non-plastic and reusable alternatives to these products are available, such as paper plates. France has already introduced a ban on plastic plates and cutlery, which will come into force in 2020.<sup>8</sup>

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8. Khan, S., 2016. 'France bans plastics cups, plates and cutlery,' *The Independent*. Available online at <<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/france-bans-plastic-cups-plates-cutlery-energy-transition-for-green-growth-a7313076.html>>

## **Plastic straws and drink stirrers**

The UK consumes approximately 8.5bn plastic straws each year and, in most circumstances, they can often be easily replaced by paper and reusable straws. We recognise that for a core group of disabled people free access to single-use plastic straws will continue to be essential until suitable alternatives can be found. Any policy on plastic straws must therefore allow for reasonable adjustments to be made. Plastic stirrers are consumed in smaller quantities but can also be easily replaced with wooden alternatives. The Scottish Government has announced its intention to phase out most plastic straws by the end of the year and Greens will keep up the pressure to see this legislation brought forward quickly and ensure that it meets the needs of disabled people.

### **Availability of single-use plastics**

There is growing public awareness of the need to reduce our plastic consumption. However no additional burden should be placed on disabled people who currently depend on single-use plastics. We acknowledge that plastic straws are a necessity for some people and will continue to be used. We believe that that manufacturers should take responsibility to design straw options that are safe for the environment and all disabled people. Greens want advice and input to be sought from disabled people when designing any single-use plastic phase out so that it is equalities-proofed.

## **Why ban pointless plastics?**

Imposing a ban swiftly stops the use of a single-use item and forced alternative replacement products to be used. The Scottish Parliament has introduced a ban on microbeads used in rinse-off personal care products. Microbeads are entirely unnecessary and can be easily replaced with natural alternatives such as granulated sugar, oats or coarse sea salt.

# Useful plastics that can be replaced

These single-use plastics play an important role in people's lives and businesses, but reusable alternatives exist. With increased support for businesses or by applying consumer nudges such as small levies or charges on the price of products, these items can be replaced and their use vastly reduced.

Some single-use plastics require significant behavioural change before they can be eradicated. For these plastics, we believe the Scottish Government should commit to phasing them out by a specific date through the use of taxes and consumer education. Examples of such plastics are below.

## Disposable cups

Scotland consumes between 200 and 800 million single-use cups each year.<sup>9</sup> Single-use cups cannot be recycled and therefore end up in landfill. They are also a major litter problem and many end up polluting the marine environment. Single use cups are largely a luxury item that have become commonplace thanks to their low cost and convenience, however they can easily be replaced by reusable cups. Given that their complete substitution with reusable cups will require significant behavioural change, we advocate a phase-out facilitated by an escalating charge followed by a complete ban in 2025.

As part of the Green budget deal for 2019/20, the Scottish Greens secured a commitment to introduce a charge on disposable drinks cups. We believe that this should be introduced as soon as possible and be set initially at 25p per cup, rising by 5p per annum each year until 2025. Such a tax would initially result in an estimated annual revenue of £50-200 million even after a significant reduction in consumption, reducing to zero once disposable cups are banned.<sup>10</sup> This would include a restriction on the use of disposable cups in sit-down establishments.

Our preference would be for this charge to be operated as a tax, with

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9. Figures provided by the Scottish Parliament Information Centre (SPICe), available upon request.

10. *ibid*



income ideally going to local government given that this is where the financial burden of waste management falls. However, this would require UK Government approval. The UK Government failed to introduce such a tax in its 2019/20 Budget statement, welcoming instead voluntary initiatives by coffee retailers and proposing a tax on the production and import of plastic packaging that does not include at least 30% recycled contents.<sup>11</sup> If the UK Government does not consent to such a tax in Scotland, the Scottish Government could instead opt to use existing powers to introduce a charge based on the plastic bag charge. As with the plastic bag charge, retailers could be encouraged to donate any income from the scheme to charities seeking to address plastic pollution issues.

## Charges on single-use plastics work

We have already seen great success with Scotland's implementing of a 5p charge on single-use carrier bags. The use of plastic bags fell by around 80% within the first year of the charge being applied. Scottish Greens have secured a commitment from the Scottish Government to increase the existing charge to 10p to tackle the remaining demand for single-use carrier bags and drop use to as close to zero as possible.

## Fast food packaging

Takeaway food and drinks containers are mostly made from single-use plastics that cannot be recycled such as expanded polystyrene. We support calls from Scottish charity *Fidra* to incentivise the use of alternative materials through a charge on plastic fast food packaging and to facilitate structural changes in food waste collection systems to allow compostable food packaging to be fully composted with food waste collected by local authorities.<sup>12</sup>

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11. Gabbatiss, J., 2018. 'Budget 2018: Philip Hammond announces a new tax on plastic packaging with less than 30% recycled material.' *The Independent*. Available online at: <<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/budget-2018-plastic-waste-packaging-recycling-coffee-cups-levy-philip-hammond-a8607366.html>>

12. *Fidra* (2018) *Compostable packaging: replacing Expanded Polystyrene in takeaway food and drink containers*. Available online at: <<https://www.fidra.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/Compostable-packaging-Replacing-expanded-polystyrene-in-food-and-drink-containers-Discussion-Paper-September-2018-1-1.pdf>>

## Useful plastics that are more challenging to replace

Some single-use plastics are particularly challenging to replace either because of a lack of alternatives or because of the significant benefits they offer to consumers. For such items, we believe the Scottish Government should:

- Support businesses that are investing in the development of non-plastic alternatives or helping bring reusable alternatives to wider markets.
- Support charities and community organisations that encourage and/or facilitate the use of reusable alternatives.
- Encourage the public to use reusable alternatives through, for example, public information campaigns, and, in the case of nappies, including them in the Baby Box scheme.

Examples of single-use products that contain plastic and that would benefit from this approach include:

### Sanitary products

Disposable sanitary products can contain up to 90% plastic content, and they either end up in landfill, incinerated or in the marine environment. A Marine Conservation Society report that 6 items of menstrual waste are found per 100 metres of beach cleaned.<sup>13</sup> Reusable alternatives include menstrual cups, reusable pads and plastic-free disposable products.

### Nappies

Plastic is a major component of disposable nappies, which largely end up landfilled or incinerated. Recycling is technically possible and schemes have been trialled, but not yet at scale. Reusable nappies are increasingly popular but remain a small part of the market.

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<sup>13</sup>Figure provided by Marine Conservation Society. More information available upon request.

## Essential single-use plastics

These are plastics which would be difficult to replace and are essential in fields such as medicine and laboratory science. This includes single-use syringes and surgical gloves. Greater research into alternative materials are needed before a switch can be made.

### **Biodegradable plastics and compostable alternatives**

At the moment there is a range of plastics marketed as biodegradable but there is little consensus on what this term means.<sup>14</sup> Compostable alternatives are packaging materials that are manufactured from plants (such as corn starch). Both biodegradable and compostable plastics can only fully degrade under specific conditions in industrial facilities and will not break down under normal environmental conditions or in home composters.<sup>15</sup> Greens would like to see international standards on biodegradable and compostable plastics adopted and greater funding of development of alternative materials at the international level.

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14. Hann et al, 2018. p.31.

15. Fidra, 2018. *Tackling the Plastic Problem. Response to UK Government consultation: Tackling the Plastic Problem: Using the tax system or charges to address single-use plastic waste.* Available upon request.

## What the Scottish Greens are doing

We have recently secured a number of government commitments and changes to legislation to make the shift from single-use plastics happen faster. The Greens in Parliament continue to champion policy changes which would see a broader end to our fossil-fuel dependency and bring about a regenerative, circular economy. Our key achievements so far in this parliamentary session are:

- **An increased charge on single-use plastic carrier bags.** We secured a commitment from the Scottish Government to increase the existing charge on plastic bags to 10p at the earliest opportunity during this year's budget negotiations.
- **Progress towards a charge on single-use coffee cups.** In the 2019/20 budget negotiations, we secured agreement that the Scottish Government will introduce legislation within the next year that includes the principle of charging for disposable drinks cups. Research provide by the Scottish Parliament Information Service (SPICe) suggests that a 25p charge on disposable drinks cups could raise between £50 million and £200 million per year.<sup>16</sup>
- **Delivering public drinking fountains.** Providing free, convenient water refill points is a simple way to get people to ditch plastic bottles. A Green amendment to the Planning Bill will require local authorities to consider where public drinking fountains can be installed in new developments.
- **Ending our fossil fuel dependency.** Greens continue to campaign to end the tax cuts and public subsidies provided to oil and gas companies in the UK. We support efforts to divest all public investment from the fossil fuel industry, including public bodies' pension funds.
- **Support for a Deposit Return Scheme and Circular Economy Bill.** We have supported Scottish Government plans to introduce a deposit return scheme (DRS). A DRS could see consumers being paid a small amount for recycling certain items, such as plastic bottles and tin cans. Greens are calling for the Government's Circular Economy Bill to be introduced to the Scottish Parliament as soon as possible.
- **Taking action on plastic microfibres.** Greens passed secured cross-party agreement that the Scottish Government should include pollution from synthetic clothing fibres in its plans to reduce plastic pollution.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup>. More information available upon request.

<sup>17</sup>. Amendment to a Scottish Parliament debate held on 8 February 2018.