

# PLASTIC POLLUTION: BRIEFING NOTE

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## WHAT WE WANT:

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**AN END TO PLASTIC POLLUTION ON UK BEACHES BY 2030.**

## WHAT IS THE PROBLEM AND ITS CAUSES?

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### PROBLEM

12 million tonnes of plastic from a wide array of sources are poured into the ocean annually<sup>1</sup>, with damaging effects on the health of the marine ecosystem and wildlife. Wildlife is frequently killed through the ingestion of, and entanglement in plastics such as packaging and ghost fishing gear. Microplastics are also entering our rivers and ocean at alarming rates. These Microplastics are now being consistently found throughout the food chain, with the effects on human health still not fully understood.<sup>2</sup>

Plastic pollution also carries toxic chemicals, pathogens and invasive species to isolated, pristine and vulnerable marine habitats, damaging the resilience of these ecosystems and marine life.

Plastic pollution is also inherently linked to the climate crisis. It is estimated that the production and incineration of plastic has pumped more than 850 million tonnes of greenhouse gases into the atmosphere. By 2050, those emissions could rise to 2.8 billion tonnes. Without addressing the plastic crisis, we cannot mitigate climate change.<sup>3</sup>

### CAUSES

The root cause of the plastic pollution crisis is the systemic over-production and over-consumption of non-essential single-use, throw away and polluting plastics. It has been estimated that by 2015, 8300 million metric tons of virgin plastics had been

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<sup>1</sup> Dr C. Sherrington, (2016) Plastics in the Marine Environment, Eunomia Research. Available at: <https://www.eunomia.co.uk/reports-tools/plastics-in-the-marine-environment/>

<sup>2</sup> HERVEY, G. (2019) *The plastic in our bodies*, accessed 17 January 2022, <https://www.politico.eu/article/the-plastic-in-our-bodies-health/>

<sup>3</sup> WWF. 2019. Plastic waste and climate change - what's the connection?, accessed 16 November 2020, <https://www.wwf.org.au/news/blogs/plastic-waste-and-climate-change-whats-the-connection>

produced since production first started in the 1920's<sup>4</sup>. Globally, plastic packaging production is expected to double by the late 2030s and quadruple by 2050.<sup>5</sup>

The plastic pollution crisis is exacerbated by our current ineffective recycling & waste systems, which cannot process the staggering volume of plastic entering the market every year. Of the 8,300 million metric tons of virgin plastics produced by 2015, approximately 6,300 Mt of plastic was waste, of which only 9% was recycled, 12% was incinerated, and 79% was accumulated in landfills or the natural environment.<sup>6</sup>

Government' responses globally have been largely inadequate and ineffective, focusing primarily on the end of life of a product and piecemeal single product bans rather than plastic reduction and replacement strategies. Whilst recycling reduces both waste and carbon emissions, compared to incineration and landfill, it is not a sustainable solution as the industry can currently only effectively recycle 2% of plastics.<sup>7</sup> What progress has been made by governments to introduce new proactive policies has also been beset with delays to implementation. For example, the Deposit Return Scheme which was first committed to in 2018 has now been delayed until 2024, meaning **56 Billion** containers will be lost to the environment which could have been prevented by an all-in Deposit Return Scheme.<sup>8</sup>

Furthermore, many countries, including the UK, have simply chosen to offshore their recycling to developing countries. This practice is ineffective as many recipient countries do not have the infrastructure to deal with amount of waste imported.<sup>9</sup> It is also becoming increasingly untenable with countries such as China banning the import of low-grade recyclables.<sup>10</sup>

The UK government is also effectively supporting and sustaining the plastic pollution crisis as it provides the highest subsidies in Europe to the fossil fuel industry, which provide the raw materials needed to produce plastics.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Geyer, R., Jambeck, J. R., & Law, K. L. (2017). Production, use, and fate of all plastics ever made. *Science advances*, 3(7), Available at:

<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5517107/>

<sup>5</sup> Center for International Environmental Law, (2019), Plastic & Climate: the Hidden Costs of a Plastic Planet Available at: <https://www.ciel.org/plasticandclimate/> p.60

<sup>6</sup> Geyer, R., et al. (2017). Production, use, and fate of all plastics ever made. *Science advances*, 3(7), Available at: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5517107/>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.storyofplastic.org/>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.reloopplatform.org/>

<sup>9</sup> Greenpeace (2021) *Trashed: how the UK is still dumping plastic waste on the rest of the world*, May 2021, <https://www.greenpeace.org.uk/resources/trashed-plastic-report/>

<sup>10</sup> Centre for Ecotechnology. What is the National Sword? Available at :

<https://www.centerforecotechnology.org/what-is-the-national-sword/#:~:text=You%20may%20have%20heard%20the,contamination%20limits%20on%20recyclable%20materials.>

<sup>11</sup> Report from The Commission to The European Parliament, The Council, The European Economic and Social Committee and The Committee of The Regions (2019) Energy prices and costs in Europe. Available at: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=COM:2019:1:FIN&from=EN> p.11

The plastic pollution crisis is also fundamentally a symptom of the disposable and throwaway consumer culture that dominates our economy, placing a huge stress on the world's resources and contributing to the climate and ecological crisis.

## THE SOLUTIONS

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To solve the plastic pollution crisis, we need joined up policies that dramatically and urgently reduce the production and consumption of non-essential single-use, throwaway and polluting plastic, and build a circular economy that ensures plastics are designed to be reused, repaired and then effectively recycled in truly circular systems.

**To achieve this, we need;**

### **LEGISLATION THAT ENDS THE PRODUCTION AND CONSUMPTION OF NON-ESSENTIAL SINGLE USE AND POLLUTING PLASTICS.**

- We need an overarching policy and legally binding targets for the elimination of plastic pollution and to bring about an end to the manufacture, sale and use of non-essential single-use, throwaway and polluting products.
- We need ambitious and consistent bans across the UK on all non-essential single-use products, not just plastics, and progressive taxes and charges for those items where alternatives are not currently available.
- We must end subsidies to fossil fuel and petro-chemical companies which are responsible for the systemic over-production of plastics. Instead government needs to incentivise green industries which develop sustainable alternatives to single-use, throwaway and polluting plastics.
- We need a global plastic treaty that creates a level playing field, cuts plastic pollution at source and cleans up the plastic that is already in the environment.

### **LEGISLATION THAT ENSURES EFFECTIVE RESOURCE USE AND WASTE MANAGEMENT**

- We need to develop a circular economy which designs out waste and pollution, keeping products and materials in use and actively regenerates natural systems.
- We need a UK wide 'all-in' Deposit Return Scheme (DRS) focused around the principals of reduction, reuse and refill by 2023.

- We need an Extended Producer Responsibility scheme (EPR) that fully embraces 'Polluter Pays' principals, covering the full environmental cost of a product throughout its life cycle, from resource extraction to recycling and incentivising business to design products for reuse and repair.
- We need to end the offshoring of the UKs domestic waste and develop and invest in domestic systems which keeps this material in the loop.

## **BUSINESS MODELS THAT ARE FOCUSED ON REDUCTION AND REUSE**

- We need business' that produce products which are fundamentally designed to be reused, repaired and eventually effectively recycled.
- We need business', large and small, to collaborate with government and each other to adopt consistent policies that create a level playing field and ultimately reduce waste and pollution across industries.

## **CULTURAL CHANGE ACROSS SOCIETY**

- We need to encourage a shift in narrative which focus' on reduction and alternative systems as the true solution to plastic pollution and acknowledges we cannot recycle our way out of the crisis.
- We need to educate wider society that plastic pollution is a symptom of our wider unsustainable consumer culture. All forms of single-use products and packaging contribute to this crisis.
- Communities and individuals should be encouraged and empowered to reduce their plastic and waste footprints.