



NEW GROUND SUMMER 2018  
Campaigning for environmental change & social justice



# HOW PLASTICS GOT POLITICAL

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**Andy Burnham**

*My vision for Manchester*

**Mary Creagh MP**

*Every day the Tories delay,  
more plastics are littered*

**Kerry McCarthy**

*Voluntary action will  
never be enough*

# Welcome to our 2018 Summer Edition

JAKE SUMNER & PHILLIP FENTON

**The influence of the BBC programme, Blue Planet grows each week. An institution, the European Union, once won Time magazine's person of the year. Perhaps a TV programme should now be taking a bow. It has had a transformative effect on public attitudes to the environment including the impact humans make. Blue Planet has helped spur change and it has been referenced by almost all the writers in our plastics focused edition of New Ground.**

What we have seen is the mainstreaming and resonance of an environmental concern - the environment getting political. This is to be welcomed. At the heart of SERA's red-green politics and as we campaign for an ambitious Labour green programme, is environmental progress and social justice entwined not separate concerns, environmental and economics policies linked not detached, and people integral to a compelling environmental programme.

The spotlight is on plastics. The huge extent and impact of plastic pollution is now being revealed and better understood every day. Beaches strewn with plastic waste litter across all parts of the globe, seas scarred by plastic in the very deepest parts and with waste swirls the size of countries. Plastics have entered the food chain - in June for example, researchers from Hull and Brunel universities found plastic particles in all mussels tested. The scourge is posing a self-generated risk to humans and wildlife across the planet.

There are strong voices, including the Chair of the Environmental Audit Select Committee, Labour MP Mary Creagh. She has highlighted the 2.5 billion coffee cups thrown away each year which can't be recycled, and called for a 25p levy - which the Government is yet to heed. Starbucks though has trailed a levy and Waitrose has committed to end disposable cups. More is needed.

Government have announced a bottle deposit return scheme but it must be far more ambitious, driving change across production and industries and directing more research to harness the UK's leading science base to work with industry to make food production

the most sustainable in the world, and set benchmarks to stop the polluters.

Labour, can lead change too, not just through the leadership of local authorities or challenging the government but as a movement. We should be going plastic free. SERA is supporting the motion passed by several branches for Labour to audit the plastic it has used over 12 months and present a plan to conference to phase them out. The SERA Parliamentary Network of MPs is putting a focus on plastics too and SERA will be holding events at Labour conference.

The case for change is not simply environmental but social. Take bottled water, and the 16 million bottles not recycled each day. Bottled water is expensive, particularly when there's quality, affordable water from our taps - the lack of public water facilities hits the poorest. It's excellent to see the Labour-run Welsh government commit to be the first 'refill nation' and to people being able to fill up reusable bottles with drinking water at a network of public buildings, businesses, community and transport hubs. Spot on.

There are lessons from abroad too, and not just the Nordic nations but a lesser known example, Sudan. Jake was in the country in April. The country suffers from plastic pollution including bags strewn about (it is recently introduced a ban). But, what is noticeable is the network of water pots every few streets for people to freely use. Local people fill up and maintain them, which are under cover like a small bus shelter, and provide cups for people too. The age-old technology of earthenware jugs keeps the water cool. It saves plastic bottles, costs and provides a communal benefit and respite in the searing heat.

The goal to remove single use plastics, change products to remove plastic waste and recycle 100% of plastics produced, is a huge challenge. We will still be affected by the damage we've already done but, if we act ambitiously now, we've a chance to live in a world that we want to see.

This edition of New Ground has inspirations from SERA members, Labour representatives and NGOs setting out their ambitions on how we purge the plastic.



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## NEWS

### SOCIALIST SOCIETY OF THE YEAR

In case you missed it, we were proud to be named Socialist Society of the year at the 2017 Excellence Awards. The Award recognised SERA's important voice and role within the Labour Party and the work of members, the executive and the excellent work of our staff, and we would like to thank everyone who has been involved in any of our campaigns or activities.

SERA's successful and high profile campaign on air quality, A Breath of Fresh Air, was particularly highlighted for praise and recognition. Launched in 2016, the campaign has highlighted the environmental and social justice impacts of the air pollution crisis and called for Labour to back a new Clean Air Act – something that was made a manifesto commitment in the 2017 General Election.

## MANCHESTER'S GREEN SUMMIT



We previously reported in New Ground how SERA were working with Andy Burnham on his Green Summit - a policy commitment first announced at a SERA event, we are proud to report back on what was a successful event. Over 700 key local businesses, environmental experts and interest groups from across Manchester came together to accelerate Greater Manchester's green ambitions. The day included headline speakers including Andy himself, workshops, Q&A panels and more.

A range of proposals and announcements were made including: brining forward the date by which Greater Manchester is made carbon neutral by at least a decade to 2040; launching a plastic-free Greater Manchester campaign; and investing up to £150m to transform cycling and walking in the city-region. A second event is now in the pipeline that will bring together findings from the first summit and shape the next steps for Greater Manchester.

## HEATHROW THIRD RUNWAY VOTE

A third runway at Heathrow is once again being proposed. SERA contacted every Labour MP calling on them to oppose expansion of Heathrow airport as we believe the government's approach is fossil fueled with no commitment to the environment or the country's climate change commitments. We also argued expansion would increase problems around air and noise pollution. And we pointed out how the government has repeatedly ignored its legal duties to take action on air quality.

We concluded by saying Labour must be ambitious; a vote against expansion is not a vote against the economy, rather it is an opportunity to call for an economic and environment policy that goes hand in hand; where growth is not reliant on fossil fuels but on renewable technology, allowing us to meet our commitments on the climate and social justice.

SERA's full statement on Heathrow can be found online at [SERA.org.uk/latest\\_posts](https://sera.org.uk/latest_posts)



## NEW ORGANISER FOR SERA



IF YOU'D LIKE TO GET IN TOUCH WITH PHILLIP, YOU CAN EMAIL HIM AT [PHILLIP.FENTON@SERA.ORG.UK](mailto:PHILLIP.FENTON@SERA.ORG.UK) OR SEND A LETTER TO SERA, 200A PENTONVILLE ROAD, LONDON, N1 9JP

Last December we waved goodbye to Adam Dyster. We want to thank him for his hard work during his time with us and wish him well in his new role at the National Trust.

Our new Organiser Phillip Fenton has been with us since March, working full time across SERA's projects and campaigns, from air pollution and plastics to SERA's largest party conference programme for some time.

Phillip has previously worked for a Labour MP and as an organiser for the Labour Party during the 2017 local and general elections. He has had a passion for the environment since living on

the South Devon Coast as a boy, later studying Geography at Exeter before completing a Masters in International public Policy Analysis at Bath.

Phillip explains "I've always had an interest in how the world works and our environment is fundamental to everything. I joined SERA because I want to help save the environment. The Labour Party is the only real force in British Politics that has the will and ability to protect our environment, we've seen that in the past; from Atlee's National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act in 1949 to the Climate Change Act in 2008. SERA has been key in providing Labour with its green voice since the 70's".



# THE PROBLEM WITH PLASTIC AND MY VISION FOR MANCHESTER

ANDY BURNHAM

**Blue Planet 2 was instrumental in raising awareness of the global plastic problem. Whilst it is widely accepted that the majority of plastic waste found in the oceans mainly originates from countries in Asia, with less waste management infrastructure in place, days before the Greater Manchester Green Summit in March 2018, it was announced that the most plastic polluted river in the world was the River Tame in Tameside, with the highest levels of micro plastic recorded. Although this finding was from a very small number of rivers sampled globally, it is clear that plastic pollution is a threat to our natural environment wherever you live.**

At the Green Summit, I established a local campaign to eliminate single use plastic from Greater Manchester by 2020. Supported by over 50 local businesses from the hospitality and tourism sector, there is an appetite for change and it was clear from the support from businesses, academics and our residents who attended the Green Summit that together we can lead the way in creating the first single use plastic free city.

## *We can lead the way in creating the first single use plastic free city*

Plastic is an essential part of our daily lives. Due to its unique properties, it has many useful and essential functions. For example, it can help to save fuel and cut carbon emissions due to its lightweight properties in planes; used in food packaging it can help to ensure food safety and extend the life of the food thereby reducing food waste. However, it is clear that the way plastics are produced, used and disposed of is causing a global environmental problem and, if left to continue, the damage is irreversible. Millions of tonnes of plastic litter and waste are entering our environment and some plastic takes hundreds of years to break down.

Single use plastic packaging, those that are thrown away after one brief use, are rarely recycled and are more prone to being littered. These include packaging, some bags, disposable cups, lids, straws

and cutlery, for which plastic is widely used due to its lightness, low cost, and practical features. These types of single-use plastics items are a major source of plastic leakage into the environment, as they can be difficult to recycle, are often used away from home and littered. They are among the items most commonly found on beaches, and represent an estimated 50% of marine litter.

Following the announcement at the Green Summit, Greater Manchester's tourism and hospitality sector have set a target to eradicate the use of single use plastics by 2020. This is as part of a wider sustainability campaign. The first step is to remove single use plastic straws, in exchange for a much more sustainable alternative. The campaign will be led by industry and supported by the Greater Manchester Combined Authority, for example we will aim to reduce the cost of alternatives for plastic straws through encouraging collective purchasing to reduce the cost and drive change, linking businesses from across the city. In June, I'm holding a round table with NUS and Greater Manchester's Universities and colleges to assess whether we can create the UK's first single use plastic free campus.

Michael Gove recently announced that plastic straws could be banned in the UK, however the announcement related to a consultation on a ban and I believe that what we need is action. Greater Manchester is a region renowned for innovation – we're large enough to experiment at scale, yet nimble enough to come together and innovate at speed. The Green Summit is a great example of a unique event that's brought people together to reduce our carbon emissions, crowdsource ideas to make Greater Manchester one of the greenest city-regions in Europe. At the summit, I also set out my ambition to bring Greater Manchester's carbon neutrality target forward by at least a decade from 2050, to double our electric vehicle charging infrastructure and to explore the creation of a GM Energy Company and GM Environment Fund.

*Greater Manchester is a region renowned for innovation – we're large enough to experiment at scale, yet nimble enough to come together and innovate at speed*

The Government are also consulting on a single use plastic bottles Deposit Return Scheme (DRS) which will help to tackle 'on the go' litter. The proposals are aimed at reducing waste from littering. Whilst I believe that this initiative will have a positive impact on litter, it does need a holistic approach to ensure it is integrated into current kerbside recycling collection schemes operated across the UK.

For years we've relied on recycling to combat the plastic problem. In Greater Manchester, we currently recycle 47% of our household waste. However, as there is a limited plastic recycling industry in the UK, we currently only collect plastic bottles for recycling (all types including toiletry bottles such as shampoo and shower gel bottles as well as milk and pop bottles). Greater Manchester has the UK's third largest Low Carbon Environment Goods and Services (LCEGS) sector, outside London and the South East. I'm keen to see the sector grow further and faster and seize the global opportunities that are emerging as we collectively strive to be kinder to our planet.

Other types of plastic food packaging such as pots, tubs and trays are mainly made out of low grade plastic that cannot easily be recycled and there is little demand for it from manufacturers. There is also no financial incentive for manufacturers to use recycled plastic in their products, which means they are able to create new plastic products out of virgin materials. This is something that I hope will be addressed through the Government's recent call for

evidence to examine how changes to the tax system could tackle the problems associated with single use plastic waste. An important aspect of tackling single-use plastic waste is innovation in more sustainable products and processes, and the Chancellor has also announced a new allocation of £20m of funding to businesses and universities to stimulate new thinking and rapid solutions in this area.

Some retailers and supermarkets are already starting to improve their packaging by using fewer different types of plastic to make it easier for this to be recycled. Whilst this is a step in the right direction, this needs to happen on a much larger scale. Innovation is what Manchester is well known for and I'm keen to see investment in this area to create some economic and green job benefits for the conurbation.

The plastic problem needs a joined up collaborative approach. Reducing single use plastics in Greater Manchester is a good start, but we need significant investment in alternatives and in the technology to recycle other types of plastic; Greater Manchester has the appetite to lead the way.

ANDY BURNHAM  
is the Labour  
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*There is no financial incentive for manufacturers to use recycled plastic in their products, which means they are able to create new plastic products out of virgin materials*

# PLASTIC *POLITICS*

LOUISA CASSON

**There's no denying that plastic pollution is being talked about in ways no other environmental issue has for many years.**

Plastic is the hot topic that everyone - from the BBC, to the Queen, to Wetherspoons - is making announcements - and even taking action on. In contrast to carbon budgets and energy efficiency, plastic pollution has surged out of the green bubble, making a splash on front pages and capturing high-level political attention at no less than the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting, summits of G7 leaders and the United Nations.

In some ways, campaigning to stop the flow of plastic into our environment defies so many of the lessons I learnt as a climate campaigner. With carbon reduction, the conventional wisdom went: go less heavy on the facts that imply doom and gloom, and avoid focusing on individualised solutions that both sound like you're casting blame and can feel hopelessly inadequate compared to the scale of the problem. With plastic, I've lost count of how many times I've heard news presenters - and even people in pubs and cafes - recalling that 'up to 12 million tonnes of plastic enters our oceans every year'. And while the Daily Mail, and in turn David Cameron's government, howled over EU standards for more energy-efficient vacuum cleaners and toasters, we now have the entire Cabinet swapping throwaway coffee cups for reusable ones and the Mail celebrating a

'Cabinet alliance to press for new taxes and restrictions on throwaway plastic'. When energy saving regulations were slammed as interfering and invasive, it's pretty incredible that affecting the nation's morning cup of coffee is now regarded as fair play.

So why are plastic tonnes a goer while the gigatonne gap remains the preserve of energy policy wonks?

On the simplest level: plastic is hugely relatable - the very nature of the problem is that single-use plastic has become central to our everyday lives. Visit any train station and you're sure to see passengers carrying disposable coffee cups, signs urging us to carry water bottles in the hot weather and salads covered in plastic film, with throwaway plastic forks and spoons included (which may also be wrapped in yet more flimsy plastic packaging, designed to be discarded immediately).

If throwaway plastic is relatable, then so is the waste it leaves behind. Who hasn't seen plastic food trays by the roadside, or plastic bottles bobbing along in rivers? While we might balk when hearing about the 16 million water bottles that go unrecycled in the UK every day, if we break that down per person, then yes, that sounds about right. When we hear about a rubbish truck's worth of plastic that enters our ocean every minute - it might be shocking but the now commonplace picture of coastlines and entangled sea creatures across the

world make denying the problem pretty impossible. Plastic pollution is a very visible scourge, which leaves an immediate trace. This is a key advantage over the invisible carbon mounting in the atmosphere, with widespread, diverse and long-term impacts.

But it's the way that plastic pollution has hit an emotional chord that is really striking. It's not that we've suddenly become inundated with single-use plastic, or that we've only just noticed the waste strewn across beaches, roadsides and riverbanks. But it's undeniable that David Attenborough's Blue Planet II series, portraying the painful, poisonous impact that plastic pollution is having on marine life across the world's oceans, galvanised the public mood, catapulting plastic into the watercooler issue (and ironically probably leading to the downfall of watercoolers and their little plastic cups).

Given this emotional resonance, it's interesting that caring about plastic pollution, even companies and individuals taking action to reduce respective plastic footprints, isn't seen as threateningly ideological. It's become one of the rare issues around today that isn't embroiled in conflicts over whose 'side' you're on. But here we come to the question of whether plastic is just the latest green fad, or something deeper: a gateway issue to much bigger social and political change.

Watching the flurry of tweets after Blue Planet II told the heartbreaking story of



*...we need an international response,  
underpinned by global solidarity that  
acknowledges our responsibility*

the harm plastic is causing to whales, it was incredible to see how many people were turning straight to big retailers, tagging the Tescos and Amazons to ditch the amount of plastic packaging on their products. The power of plastic to galvanise people into action, defending the natural world and demanding major shifts in corporate responsibility is something to watch very closely indeed. It is here that plastic becomes politically very interesting: opening up the potential for broader societal and political shifts.

Government ministers are already paying lip-service to this. Michael Gove has hooked his green crusade on plastic as the clearest illustration of his affirmation that environmental policy must also be insulated from capture by producer interests who put their selfish agenda ahead of the common good. Even the Prime Minister herself has spoken about the need to 'end throwaway culture' - words you'd expect to hear more from a seasoned activist.

But we need a societal response that goes beyond pithy phrases. We're already started to see big plastic producers deploying the same tactics from the fossil fuel industry's playbook (themselves copied from tobacco companies) to shirk responsibility for the problem. Those efforts to cast doubt over the scale of the problem ("it's just a litter problem") and offering solutions that avoid tackling the problem at source (such as funding bins emblazoned with corporate logos, rather than reducing the production of single-use plastic) could gain the upper ground. If we want the current buzz around plastics to have a profound political legacy, Labour must seize the moment and play a role in what can become a powerful movement for change.

For while the Tories have tried to own this issue - from Gove matching his tie to his reusable coffee cup, to the Treasury consulting on new taxes and charges - tackling plastic pollution properly and embracing the opportunities it opens up should be Labour's natural territory. Labour's efforts to open up access to coastal paths tapped into the nation's nostalgia for seaside holidays and coastal walks - the same sentiment behind communities coming together to clean up beaches. Equally, provisions for introducing the hugely successful plastic bag charges across the UK comes from the Climate Change Act, one of the most important and vital pieces of legislation passed by the last Labour Government. It shows that Labour can be ahead of the curve and tackle the big picture - not just ride the wave.

Passing the world's first comprehensive climate law underpinned the UK's efforts to motivate a global response to climate change. Just as carbon pollution doesn't stop at any borders, plastic now flows on currents all around the world. That means we need an international response, underpinned by global solidarity that acknowledges our responsibility (with many of the major plastic producers headquartered in Europe and North America) and capacity to make a difference - rather than falling into the trap of simply blaming the South East Asian countries frequently namechecked for the highest leakage rates of plastic entering the ocean.

That global response starts at home. Labour-run cities and councils can set the bar high, just as they have with plans to shift to 100% clean energy. Sadiq Khan has announced plans to roll out a network of water fountains across

London to cut pollution from single-use plastic bottles, while Bristol Council have built on the Refill campaign, started by Bristol campaigners City to Sea, making it easier for people to fill up on tap water across the city. Labour councillors are well-placed across the country to take action, translating what 'resource efficiency' actually looks like in practice.

This can also go bigger. There's a significant opportunity for Labour to channel momentum to tackle plastics into support for new and innovative economic models, developing a 'sharing economy' that safeguards workers and consumers. These are vital tenets of a less resource-intensive economy, where everyone has a role and a responsibility.

As the sea of announcements tackling plastic continues, it's injecting both hope and urgency to public concern for the natural world. I've recently heard mutterings that the focus on plastic pollution has distracted attention from all the other environmental challenges facing us, pulling focus from climate change. But this issue is now thriving off its own momentum, and offers an entry-point for broader change. Environmentalism at large is now being viewed as a vote winning strategy by the Tories. Labour should see it as a strategy for change.

LOUISA CASSON is an environmental campaigner and is a member of the SERA Executive Committee. She tweets at @LouisaCasson





# EVERY DAY THE TORIES DELAY, HALF A MILLION COFFEE CUPS AND 700,000 BOTTLES ARE LITTERED

MARY CREAGH MP

**Plastic is everywhere. But the huge volumes we produce, use once and throw away mean plastic is now in the food we eat and the air we breathe, from the deep ocean to the Arctic North. While there has been a lot of talk from the Tories, they have taken no real action to turn back the plastic tide. This is despite the fact that plastic takes 5 seconds to make, 5 minutes to use and 500 years to disintegrate.**

Plastic is a wonder product; it is cheap, easy to make, versatile and durable. It has made products more affordable, and its light weight reduces transport costs. Single-use plastics have also brought benefits: from low-cost hygienic medical products to making food last longer. It is no wonder that the amount of plastic each person uses is growing worldwide. But the rise of plastic has fostered a throwaway culture where 13 billion plastic bottles are used in the UK each year. This has a terrible environmental cost.

Walk along any beach and you will find plastic marking the line of the tide. Old pieces of fishing gear, such as buoys and plastic nets lie next to plastic bags and bottles. It puts off tourists and harms wildlife. We are all paying the price of dealing with it: in 2010 local councils spent £15m organising beach cleans.

In the sea, plastic is having a devastating impact on fish, seabirds, and other marine wildlife. Animals become tangled in large pieces of plastic debris and suffocate or

starve. Small plastic debris, microplastics, is often mistaken for food and eaten. This threatens commercially important fish and shellfish, but it also means plastic which has washed into the sea is entering the food chain. The vast majority of litter in the UK's coastal waters is plastic, and things are set to get worse: on current trends the amount of plastic in the sea will treble by 2025, according to the Foresight Future of the Sea report.

The plastic pandemic has spread to all parts of the ocean all over the world, in shallow waters and deep. Worrying new research shows plastic is building up in one of the world's most unique and vulnerable environments: the Arctic. The Arctic is already under stress from climate change. It is warming twice as fast as the rest of the world, and summer sea ice cover could disappear within a generation. Researchers have found that plastic concentrations – in particular microplastics – build up in the sea ice in the winter, and are released during the summer melt. Most of the marine plastic pollution which comes from the UK ends up in the Arctic, carried by currents and prevailing winds. We have a unique responsibility to prevent plastic waste in the UK entering the sea. This is something my Committee will be investigating over the summer.

While large pieces of plastic litter are unsightly, the biggest risk comes from what you cannot see. Weathered by wind and tide, large pieces of plastic break

down into microplastics which have been found in fish, birds, shellfish and even deep sea creatures. The Chief Medical Officer, Professor Dame Sally Davies has said she is concerned about the physical effects of microplastics on humans such as blockage of the gut and chemical toxicity from toxic substances and release them when they pass through the digestive system.

*While large pieces of plastic litter are unsightly, the biggest risk comes from what you cannot see*

Making cosmetic products which contain microbeads was banned this year, after my committee called for it back in 2016. But there is still much to do to tackle microplastic pollution from other sources. Car tyres, road paint, and clothing and upholstery are all sources of airborne microplastics. When breathed in, microplastics cause lung damage, including scarring the lung tissue. During our inquiry, we were told that the smallest pieces of plastic – known as nanoplastics – are small enough to pass into the bloodstream, and can even permeate cell membranes. Yet there is a dearth of research into the human health effects, and the Government should be funding this as a matter of urgency.

## *The 5p charge on plastic bags means we have used nine billion fewer bags since it was introduced two years ago*

Instead of taking action to turn back the plastic tide, the Tories have focused on generating positive headlines to try to rebrand their party and boost their appeal to young people. For eight years, Tory Environment Ministers have sat on their hands and ignored calls from the recycling industry for policies to drive up recycling rates.

The Tories have pursued 'do nothing policy, while evidence of the harms of plastic has grown, leaving the recycling industry to face a double whammy. First, China has recently banned imports of plastic waste, which means contaminants could build up in the UK. The chief executive of a leading waste management company recently told me the effect of the ban on prices in the UK recycling market threatens the viability of some UK recycling centres.

Second, Brexit could mean we lose the EU's legally binding recycling targets. New long-term targets would drive investment in the UK recycling industry, and help boost the stalling English recycling rate. The EU is in the process of updating its targets as part of its circular economy package. If the UK does not sign up to the ambitious proposed targets then we risk falling behind the rest of Europe.

We have had a lot of good talk from Ministers. Speeches re-announcing intentions of 65% households waste recycled by 2035. But the reality is that he has taken no concrete action to boost faltering recycling rates or reduce plastic ending up in the ocean. His department is consumed by Brexit – a problem he created – and unable to come up with the new, radical policies the UK badly needs.

Every day the Tories delay, half a million coffee cups and 700,000 bottles are littered. The solutions are not rocket science. We learned them in school: reduce, reuse, recycle.

First, we need to reduce the amount of plastic we use. That means encouraging people to bring their own water bottle. It means obliging restaurants, cafes, and bars to offer free refills. In many European cities drinking fountains are commonplace, but there is just one water fountain in West Yorkshire. Sadiq Khan, the mayor of London, is leading the way with his plans for a network of water fountains in London. There is no sign of the Tories doing the same for the rest of England.

Second, we need to encourage people to reuse their plastic. A small charge on single-use plastic items is often the best way to nudge consumers to do the right thing. The 5p charge on plastic bags means we have used nine billion fewer bags since it was introduced two years ago. A 25p latte levy on coffee cups would help reduce the mountain of 2.5 billion coffee cups the UK uses every year, none of which are recycled. It would encourage people to invest in a reusable cup. As nice as it was to see the cabinet told to use a reusable coffee cup, we need policy not piety to encourage consumers to do the right thing.

Last, but most important of all, we need a fundamental redesign of the UK's system of taxing waste. The two pillars of the system, Landfill Tax and the Producer Responsibility Note system are supposed to reduce waste going to landfill and to make companies pay to ensure their packaging is recycled. But English household recycling

rates are stalling, and the waste industry has told my committee the Landfill Tax has done all it can to promote recycling.

It has been over 20 years since the PRN system was introduced (by the Tories in the 1990s) and we want to know whether it has driven up recycling rates, simplified packaging design, or delivered high-quality recycling. I have asked the National Audit Office to investigate the system and the 200 firms which are authorised to issue Producer Responsibility Notes and collect a fee. Where does the money go? Not to hard-pressed councils whose budgets have been slashed. I am concerned they may be exploiting the system's opacity and complexity.

The Tories' attempt to rebrand themselves as the party of the environment is a cynical attempt to win back the young people who left them in droves at the last election. They have made some big promises on the environment, but when the media moves on Ministers bicker in Cabinet, putting environmental problems in the 'too difficult' box. The public wants to see action, and consumers have shown they are willing to switch to sustainable alternatives. Now Ministers need to step up and do their bit.

MARY CREAGH MP  
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# ONE LESS BOTTLE IN THE OCEAN

FIONA LLEWELLYN

**How many plastic bottles of water have you seen out and about today? Whether on the street, in someone's hand, or in a shop, bottled water is everywhere. At the same time, thanks in part to Blue Planet II, awareness about ocean plastic is at an all-time high in the UK. People are horrified – and rightly so. Around eight million tonnes of plastic is entering the world's ocean each year, killing wildlife, damaging ecosystems, ruining our shorelines and entering our food chain. Clearly not good news for anyone.**

This is why in 2016 the Zoological Society of London (ZSL) launched the #OneLess campaign. #OneLess is a collaborative initiative, working to transform London into a city that no longer uses plastic bottled water, and instead refills. We have decent tap water here in the UK – so why do we feel the need to package it in single-use plastic?

The aim of the #OneLess campaign is to create a 'refill revolution' across London (and eventually the whole UK), where carrying a reusable bottle becomes the new social norm and filling it up on the go is easy. We're doing it because we all need to get serious about reducing the amount of single-use plastic in the world, if we're to have any hope of stopping the damage it's causing to our ocean. Every time someone refills instead of buying a single-use plastic bottle of water, that's potentially one less bottle in the ocean.

And just in case you were wondering why this is an issue for London and the UK as a whole, the culprits throwing plastic into oceans are not just far-off, developing countries with poor waste management systems. Take a walk along the River Thames during a low tide. You'll see hundreds and hundreds of plastic bottles and other plastic items littering the

shoreline. So many in fact, that in just two years, with our partner Thames 21, we've collected over 37,000 plastic drink bottles from along the Thames as part of our work to understand the scale of the problem.

Londoners individually churn through an average of 175 plastic water bottles each every year. Only around half of these are recycled, the rest end up in landfill, incineration or are littered, ending up in our streets, our waterways and rivers, from where they can flow out to the ocean. In London for example, many people forget that we are in essence a coastal city, linked directly to the ocean by the River Thames.

The good news is that everyone in the UK can make a difference really quickly and really easily. If all UK adults 'went #OneLess' today and stopped buying bottled water, choosing instead to carry and use a refillable bottle, we'd eliminate over 7.7 billion plastic bottles from the system every year.

The #OneLess movement is already spreading across London, with retailers, venues, food outlets, visitor attractions and universities 'going #OneLess', saying no to bottled water and joining the refill revolution. Adopters so far include Selfridges, ZSL London Zoo, the Natural History Museum, 15Hatfields, Borough Market, Sotheby's and King's College London.

The potential for change here in London, and across the UK, is huge - and the neat thing about #OneLess is that we're looking for the solutions to help make this change. ZSL are now working with the Mayor of London to test different ways of improving the city's 'on-the-go' drinking water infrastructure, including installing a network of drinking fountains in public places. We've also teamed up

with City to Sea to trial a refill scheme (#RefillLondon) that allows people to pop into shops, cafes and even pubs, and fill up for free, with no questions asked.

We haven't got all the solutions to unlock the refill revolution yet though. For example, how can major events, such as big marathons and festivals completely eliminate bottled water and still hydrate thousands of people quickly and easily? And that's why we've just launched the #OneLess Design Fellowship 2018. Over the summer we'll be working with designers, urbanists, technologists, planners and architects to design and develop innovative solutions to overcome some of the more difficult barriers preventing London from eliminating bottled water. These solutions will be showcased and trialled later in the year.

As individuals, we can all make the decision to say no to plastic bottled water. But we need more leaders, businesses, organisations, local authorities and government bodies to take responsibility too. Join our growing network of #OneLess pioneers who are all actively taking steps (however small) to eradicate bottled water. We've only got one ocean, and no-one wants it to be filled with plastic.

Find out more at [www.onelessbottle.org](http://www.onelessbottle.org) or follow @onelessBTL on Twitter

FIONA LLEWELLYN,  
Marine Project  
Manager,  
Zoological Society  
of London





# THE CORPORATE RESPONSE TO PLASTICS *AND ENSURING LASTING SUSTAINABLE CHANGE*

JONATHON PORRITT  
& IVANA GAZIBARA

**2017 witnessed an unprecedented level of interest in the topic of plastics. It was the year that Ocean Rescue and Blue Planet 2 programmes sparked outrage and sadness about our plastics addiction and the environmental damage it is doing to the planet, particularly the oceans. The twittersphere was in overdrive with emotional messages and promises to never use a single plastic bag again. But will it stick?**

It was only in 2014 that we discovered that more than five trillion pieces of plastic are floating in the world's oceans, largely deriving from products such as food and drink packaging and clothing. Soon after that, it was the turn of microbeads to hit the headlines. Greenpeace campaigned for a ban, and at the end of 2015 the US delivered. By the following year, more than 300,000 people signed a petition asking for the same ban in the UK, and the Government rapidly acceded.

Today there are multiple campaigns under way, from the Surfers Against Sewage Plastics Free Coastlines campaign, to MSC's Plastic Challenge, to the UN's #cleanseas work. Awareness about plastics pollution is at an all-time high, providing an incredibly important window of opportunity for radical change.

That window was blown right open when Blue Planet 2 aired. It was the most watched BBC programme of 2017, and it helped catalyse a wave of corporate and policy

activity. The BBC itself committed to go plastics-free, directly referencing the impact of the programme, and a number of businesses followed with a variety of increasingly ambitious targets around plastics. Sky has set itself a target of phasing out all single-use plastics from its business and its supply chain by 2020; Iceland committed to remove all plastic from its own-label products by 2023; LIDL will use 50% recycled materials within its own-brand packaging by 2025; and Waitrose will not to sell any of its own-label food in black plastic (which is largely unrecyclable) beyond 2019. Nothing like some good old fashioned competition, as they say.

And fast-moving consumer goods companies have been on the move as well. In 2017, Unilever pledged to use 100% reusable, recyclable or compostable plastic packaging by 2025. Since then, Nestlé and 11 other big brands have signed up to the same targets. In October 2017, Procter and Gamble launched the Fairy Ocean Plastic Bottle, made from 100% post-consumer recycled and ocean plastic. Both Coca-Cola and PepsiCo have come out with plastic plans of their own, though both have been roundly castigated by Greenpeace.

It's a reasonable assumption that new policy and regulation will emerge far faster than would have been the case without such huge public concern. The EU recently declared that all packaging in member countries will have to be recyclable or reusable by 2030. And the UK has now gone beyond the

microbeads ban to consult on the best way of introducing a deposit return scheme, as has already been introduced in Scotland.

At the end of April this year, the UK Plastics Pact was unveiled, bringing together Tesco, Sainsbury, Morrisons, Aldi, Lidl and Waitrose in a series of pledges: by 2050, all plastic packaging will be reused, recycled or composted; 70% will actually be recycled or composted; and all plastic packaging should have 30% average recycled content.

This was broadly welcomed by campaigners – but not as an alternative to proper legislation from Government. There's considerable scepticism, for instance, about a further pledge to remove all single-use packaging that is 'unproblematic or unnecessary'. Who decides that, you may ask! And there's anger that the retailers have been campaigning so hard behind the scenes to ensure that they don't end up paying more to address the plastic packaging challenge – despite paying much less than retailers pay in most European countries.

Beyond that, a variety of niche innovations are bubbling up from the edges. Ooho has made waves with its algal-based edible water 'pouches', which are now featured at Selfridges. A group of Japanese scientists are working on a new species of bacteria (*Ideonella sakaiensis*) that 'eats' PET. Ecovative have designed a new form of packaging made of mushroom 'roots' - cheap, plentiful, easy to grow,



ONLY

**14%**  
OF GLOBAL PLASTIC  
PACKAGING  
IS ACTUALLY COLLECTED  
FOR RECYCLING

AROUND

**1 MILLION  
TONNES**  
OF POST-CONSUMER  
PLASTIC WASTE  
IS RECYCLED

WHICH  
IS LESS  
THAN

**1/3**

OF THE  
TOTAL  
VOLUME  
USED

and biodegradable. And the Ekoplaza store in Amsterdam recently opened the world's first plastic-free supermarket aisle, which it will roll out to all of its 74 branches by the end of the year.

So, plastics is at an inflection point: we know what the issues are, we understand the need for change, and there are some genuinely pioneering practices out there, from corporate commitments to disruptive innovations to legislation. But the critical point in any change story is sustaining that change so that it effectively becomes the 'new normal'. For plastics, that means:

## 1. GO FOR SCALE.

As much as the individual corporate targets are laudable, campaigners have challenged them to resist 'collaboration fatigue', and to make sure they prioritize working with others to ensure pioneering practice is taken to scale. The UK Plastics Pact is a good start, but there's far more still to be done – and scale is absolutely critical to move some of the most interesting innovations out of the niche space and into the mainstream.

## 2. THINK (AND ACT) GLOBALLY.

Whilst a lot of today's plastics campaigns and policy today are locally focused, plastics pollution will require globally-coordinated action. This was powerfully demonstrated when China banned the import of plastic waste at the end of last year, a move that left the British recycling industry in disarray. Two-thirds of our recycled waste was exported to China, and will now need to be incinerated, landfilled or exported elsewhere.

## 3. 'RECYCLABLE' IS NOT ENOUGH.

Another key part of the plastics challenge is not just what's recyclable, but what's actually recycled. The reality is that

only 14% of global plastic packaging is actually collected for recycling, with chronic infrastructure deficits in many developing and emerging economies.

But even here in the UK, it's hardly a brilliant picture. Around a million tonnes of post-consumer plastic waste is recycled, less than a third of the total volume used. Again, collaboration here is going to be critical. M&S, for instance, has a target that "all M&S product packaging in the UK that could end up with our customers will not only be 'recyclable' but 'widely recycled'." Great – but there's not a hope in hell of M&S delivering this on its own.

## 4. INNOVATE FASTER.

The grand challenge of plastics pollution will need a lot of bold leaps. Without disruptive redesign and innovation, both technologically and through new supply chains, we cannot hope to get this mega-challenge properly sorted. What's encouraging is that a number of initiatives are looking to support such ventures, through early stage funding, from Closed Loop Oceans, to Sky's Ocean Rescue Ventures, to the Innovation Moonshots programme of the New Plastics Economy initiative.

## 5. TACKLING THE ELEPHANT.

Greenpeace is right to call for a shift in emphasis "from one of individual responsibility towards corporations reducing their production of throwaway plastic packaging." Yet we still have to address most people's dominant attitude to consumption. Our current 'normal' means rapidly consuming the stuff we buy, and throwing away the packaging. If all we end up with at the end of this change process is society being more willing to recycle, this will be a failure.

True enough, there is some evidence of change in societal habits in this area, supported by the right set of policy interventions. When the 5p plastic bag charge came into place in this country in 2015, for example, there was a lot of doubt as to its impact. And yet, less than a year later, England's plastic bag usage dropped by 85%. And we know that there are more ambitious schemes that have had similar effects in other countries, such as the bottle take-back system in Norway. For example, it will be fascinating to see who cracks the whole refill challenge. The Ellen MacArthur Foundation estimates that reuse models are economically attractive for at least 20% of plastic packaging (by weight), to the tune of \$9 billion.

The good thing about these initiatives is that they challenge the very essence of our 'use and throw away' culture. Those horrendous gyres of plastic waste across our oceans provide the most visibly compelling proof we've ever had that there is no 'away' on planet Earth. And there never will be.

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# HOW WARM WORDS, LITTLE ACTION AND PLASTIC RECOVERY DON'T MIX

ALAN WHITEHEAD MP

**At last, it seems the nation has got plastics. It may have taken a documentary by a national treasure to shift the nation in the general direction of 'plastics are not such a good thing as people thought and something ought to be done about it' but that is where we are now, and clearly there is a sudden and not very coherent pressure on government to do something about it.**

Government response has been equally incoherent. Theresa May has committed the country to eliminate all 'avoidable' plastic waste by 2042, (or by 2050 if you read Michael Gove's 25 year Environment plan) there will be 'consultations' on a possible deposit return scheme for plastic bottles, a vague treasury suggestion that disposable coffee cups and food packaging could face a levy, a possible consultation on banning plastic straws, drinks stirrers and plastic stemmed cotton buds. Some words essentially designed to suggest that action is under way, but very little actual action, as has already been reflected upon by the House of Commons environmental audit committee which has forensically taken apart the distance between the warm words and anything emerging from them and has already taken government to task for foot dragging after the press releases had started to go cold.

This, though is now it seems how 'plastics' are going to be dealt with in the public realm. Take an important but essentially peripheral element of the plastics stream, announce an enquiry or a very general proposal to deal with it and then kick it into the long grass. Granted, some specific actions are being taken, such as the ban on

plastic bags, but that particular measure has, a long history of being campaigned upon well before the present broader issue really came to public attention.

The reality of 'dealing with plastics' however is far more complex and challenging than the immediate raft of 'consultations' suggest. To start with it is not just about 'single use plastics' which somehow can be reduced or eliminated: over 70% of plastic waste overall arises from plastic packaging, which is not going to be significantly reduced or replaced in the very near future, but continues to mount each year with all the consequences of placing yet more virgin plastic into the environment without clear lines of approach about how it can either be recycled reused or minimized.

It is instructive to consider briefly how this mountain of plastic waste has been managed over the last decade or so. While plastic waste collection has improved over that period so that for example 58% of used plastic bottles and 32% of tubs and trays are now collected one way or another, (which still means vast quantities of bottles, throwaway items and packaging simply enter the waste stream mostly to end up land filled or incinerated) very little is then done with the material that is actually collected. Correction: something is done with what is collected but it does not fit the description of 'reuse or recycling' very accurately, unless you believe that putting a jumble of low grade plastic waste in containers and shipping it halfway across the world really counts in that context.

For that is what the country has mostly been doing with plastic waste that is

collected: essentially putting much of the plastic however collected into low grade mixed plastic filled containers and shipping them mostly to China. Almost 60% of plastic waste over the last decade has been exported in this way, which means that only a proportion of a proportion is actually processed in any way in the UK. This was for a while a mutually beneficial relationship: China needed basic plastic for its rapidly expanding consumer services, and for the UK a useful 'safety valve' was in place meaning that little effort after collection, had to be put into the fairly expensive business of actually recycling the stuff collected.

*China has now stopped all mixed waste plastic imports as of the beginning of 2018*

But now China has had enough. Literally. After announcing its 'Green Wall' policy in 2012 (to which no notice was taken and exports continued unabated) China has now stopped all mixed waste plastic imports as of the beginning of 2018. This means that vast quantities of mixed grade plastic have no market anymore and will have to be dealt with somehow within the UK, assuming substitute markets in South East Asia are not secured. In practice, just as moves are under way to start to deal with at least some of the more egregious misuses of plastics, a whole new mountain of collected but

otherwise unprocessed mixed low grade plastic will appear in the waste economy, probably to be dealt with by incineration at best, and further landfill at worst.

The relatively easy route of export over the last decade has not only meant that serious plastic recycling facilities have been slow to develop, but the very basis upon which plastic can be presented to such facilities has lagged in development. Plastic film, for example is collected by only 19% of local authorities, and yet over 700,000 tonnes arise each year, with very few facilities established to reprocess it even once collected.

But even if we were able to collect most plastic efficiently, and then recycle it so that material was available for remaking plastic products, there is still a gap between that position and the reality of serious amounts of recycled content being incorporated into new products. At present, not much recycled material finds its way into equivalent products – it is estimated that only about 3% of plastic film goes into making new plastic film or similar products – all the rest comes from virgin plastic sucked into the system. Most collected film goes (or went) to China, and is now being released back onto the UK market that contains very little in the way of plant that can effectively recycle film, let alone reuse the captured film in new products.

Ten years ago I worked on and presented a ten minute rule Bill to parliament ‘the Recycled content Obligation Bill’ which would have given government power to specify a level of recycled content for particular products. That would have, in my opinion started to resolve the ‘pull through’

problem of much recycling – investment in producing a recycled ‘product’ not taking place because investors say that there is no market for the product – recyclers finding that there are no processing plants for whatever is recycled : a dampening effect on recycling efforts – and in this instance recycling to preserve the integrity of different product quality: result - a recycling outcome low in the waste hierarchy and more virgin plastic coming into the system.

*If we do not soon develop measures to deal with the mountain of unsorted plastic waste coming our way, the plastics outlook will look much worse for some time to come*

All this leads to some fairly stark conclusions about our present plastics landscape. If we do not soon develop measures to deal with the mountain of unsorted plastic waste coming our way, the plastics outlook will look much worse for some time to come. We will certainly make no progress with the goal of making the plastics economy as circular as we can, so that efforts to remove single use plastics from the stream are backed up by measures that limit virgin plastic coming into the stream and adding to the pile of problems down the road.

And that is, I think, the metric we ought to apply to the big question of whether the warm words uttered by the Government

on plastics over the past few months have any long term substance: will there be measures to deal with collection of plastic which hands it to recyclers in a useful state? – we might at the very least require all plastic to be consistently collected by type in all parts of the country. Will there be any legislation that specifies how manufacturers should approach the issue of using what has been recycled in new products? Will there be any plan or schemes that enable the industry rapidly to develop effective plant for recycling plastic to a high standard? We provide underwriting for the development of renewable energy: why not do so for the development of renewable plastic?

There is a new waste strategy expected later this year from the Department of Environment. To date the consultation on it has not included any of the elements mentioned here that might apply to plastics. Unless consultations on bright ideas such as a return deposit on plastic bottles are not followed up by action on methods to follow through on what might be a much greater supply of recyclable bottles into the system, then such plans will have little long term effect on the big end issue on circularity in the plastics economy. Right now the signs that Government has understood this or is taking the initial ideas on plastic use and reuse, are few and far between.

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# THE LAST STRAW

HOLLY LYNCH MP

**The proliferation of plastic waste is impacting both our natural environments and wildlife across the world. The problem has become so severe that the UN's oceans chief has called it a "planetary crisis" warning that life in the seas risks irreparable damage.**

It's reassuring to see action being taken across the world seeking to address the crisis and I'm particularly pleased that the Parliamentary authorities have recently set out plans to go plastic free across the estate. This will demonstrate to lawmakers that bold action is possible and significantly reduce the amount of unnecessary waste generated in Westminster alone.

As Labour's shadow minister with responsibilities for the marine environment and coastal communities I've been following the debate around plastics extremely closely. I've become increasingly concerned that unlike Parliament itself, the Conservative Government are failing to match their own rhetoric with concrete action.

The Labour party has a proud record of protecting our marine environment, and one of the great achievements of the previous Labour Government was the Marine and Coastal Access Act 2009. This created a system for improving the management and protection of coastal ecosystems including the creation of a network of marine conservation zones. It is in this tradition that the Shadow DEFRA team have been working on a number of campaigns to tackle plastic waste and protect our sealife.

Even prior to the spellbinding Blue Planet II series, Labour launched a campaign to tackle plastic drinking straws. I initially wrote to the top 20 bar and restaurant chains in the country, urging them to adopt a "straws on request only" policy, and asking them to stock only biodegradable straws. The response was positive and several major chains responded with a commitment to remove straws from their businesses. Upon realising that plastics have crept into tea bags, Labour's DEFRA team sent letters to the top tea bag producers, urging them to consider plastic-free alternatives. Responses are currently coming back from these firms and it has been reassuring to see the appetite for action on this specific product. Although the amount of plastic contained within teabags may be small, it is just one more product which doesn't need to contain plastic and the vast majority of the public would not even be aware that it does.

We recognise that one of the greatest challenges we face in tackling marine pollution, is preventing plastics from reaching our oceans. This will require changing consumer behaviour, changing the behaviour of businesses, as well as improved product design and recycling.

It will also require Government leadership in order to truly make single use plastics a thing of the past, and to embed recycling into our lives. Yet for all Michael Gove's big announcements, our primary concern about this Government is that they have failed to bring forward a single piece of primary legislation on any of their announcements on the environment since the last election.

The deposit return scheme for plastic bottles highlights how the Government's environmental policy is quick to get the headlines, but much slower to take action in reality.

Michael Gove has now confirmed that a consultation on the specifics of the scheme will have to wait until the conclusion of the ongoing single-use plastic tax consultation by the Treasury. We're told to expect a date of 2020 but with so much uncertainty at present and timelines sliding across a range of DEFRA policy areas, I don't think anyone would be surprised if this was allowed to slip. This is indefensible when, as a country, we use 13 billion plastic drinks bottles a year, with more than 3 billion of those not recycled. Why is it taking the Government so long to introduce a deposit return scheme when 700,000 plastic bottles are littered every day?

It's a similar story with coffee cups. 99.75% of disposable coffee cups used in Britain do not get recycled and as of 2011, it was estimated that we threw away 2.5 billion coffee cups per year in the UK, a figure that is likely to be even higher today. A poll for the Independent newspaper found that 54 per cent of the public support a latte levy of 25p levied on all drinks sold in disposable cups. Businesses are taking the lead, with Starbucks trialling a 5p surcharge at 35 locations across London, and Pret a Manger, Costa Coffee and Greggs all offering discounts for bringing a reusable cup.

Once again we were led to believe that Gove may have been taking this seriously. In January he highlighted the issue by handing out reusable coffee cups to all



*...it has been heartening to see the war on plastics go from something of a fringe issue, to now entering the mainstream*

members of the Cabinet, however, after a few good headlines, the action failed to materialise when the Government rejected the latte levy in March.

We are now eagerly awaiting the Government's upcoming waste strategy for action to tackle the problem of disposable coffee cups.

To add to this inaction in preventing plastic waste, we're also concerned about the Government's approach to recycling the waste which has already been produced.

*The recycling rate has stalled in this country and we're set to miss the current target of 50% by 2020*

Progress on recycling must be driven through a comprehensive framework and the EU has been leading the way, with a target of 2030 for phasing out single-use plastics. In addition the EU's circular economy package requires 65% of municipal waste to be recycled by 2035.

Compare these concrete, ambitious targets to the vagueness of the Government's 25 Year Environment Plan. While the EU is outlining exactly where targets need to be met, the Government's plan states that they will be developing ambitious new future targets and milestones,

but that it will take 25 years to tackle single-use plastics. I'm glad that the Government has now finally agreed to support the EU targets as we leave the EU, yet it is concerning that Europe is doing all the running on this issue.

The recycling rate has stalled in this country and we're set to miss the current target of 50% by 2020. We need to ensure that the UK will not fall beneath EU standards on the environment post-Brexit and the Government must put in place policies which can achieve this.

Finally, when discussing waste prevention, we can't overlook the impact of huge cuts to local authorities and how this has impacted on their ability to collect waste in a timely and efficient manner. We're seeing increasing numbers of councils opting for collections every three weeks with many introducing increased charges for bulky waste or garden waste collections.

Conservatives currently posing as environmental champions would do well to reflect on the link between these cuts to council budgets and the fact that fly tipping is at its highest level in years. Because with fewer resources for bin collections, street cleaning, litter picking, and bulky collections it should be no surprise that litter is getting worse; it's fair to say that it's one of the most visible signs of the Government's continued austerity.

These issues around recycling and reducing waste are so important because it's only by tackling the amount of plastic that we consume and litter

on land, that we can hope to reduce the amount that ends up in our seas.

It's fantastic that people have started to fully appreciate the link between the sometimes rather dry topics of waste and materials use, and the health of marine environments. There is much more to do and international action will also prove crucial in this.

The BBC's Blue Planet 2 series inspired both wonder at the beauty of the world's oceans and a horror at the way they are being desecrated. Since the series was broadcast, it has been heartening to see the war on plastics go from something of a fringe issue, to now entering the mainstream. People across the country are switching to reusable bags, bottles and coffee cups. Retailers are being called out on social media for examples of excessive and wasteful packing in their stores, and events such as Wimbledon are banning straws, after handing out 400,000 last year.

However, if we are to see meaningful change we need really need the Government to be taking a lead. Labour's DEFRA team will continue to hold them to account over their promises on this issue to ensure that we tackle the scourge of marine plastic waste.

**HOLLY LYNCH MP** is Shadow DEFRA Minister responsible for fisheries. She is Labour MP for Halifax. She tweets at @HollyLynch5



# THE IMPORTANCE OF SERA AND *THE PATH FOR CHANGE*

BARRY SHEERMAN MP

**We founded SERA, the Socialist Environmental Resource Association in 1973, as the threat to our beautiful, fragile planet from the activity of the human species became crystal clear. Friends of the Earth and Green Streams were also responses to this danger. A small group of us thought that the Labour and Co-operative movements in the UK and the trade unions were lagging behind in fully acknowledging and addressing these dangers and we saw SERA as a way of responding and raising awareness.**

Our environment continues to face extremely challenging times and the need for SERA today and the work it does, is not only as high as ever but it has, if anything, increased. SERA, because it has been around for so long, now finds itself in an even stronger position, as it can leverage on all of its history, experience and expertise to achieve significant impact at a time when public, political and private attention is raised.

We are now finally prepared to face these challenges in a stronger, more informed and better equipped way. Attention has now turned towards solving the most urgent environmental and social challenges Britain and the wider world face, from climate change to fuel poverty; from the need to tackle plastic pollution to the shift towards an economy increasingly less dependent on fossil fuels.

For all the passion, energy and action that went into the environmental movement way back when, it is in a lot of ways astonishing to see that, today, many of the original issues remain as unresolved as on our first day, even though we now witness the rise and strengthening of a new, equally enthusiastic and hopeful wave of environmental concern. It is perhaps for this very reason that we should very bluntly ask ourselves; if someone from an alien world had visited 50 years ago and came back just now, would we be able to tell them with a straight face all the great things we've done to improve the state of our planet or would we just feel ashamed? I am an optimist, but I believe that we would struggle to answer this question with the clear evidence of change that our planet deserves.

*We must shy away from the Michael Gove style approach to environmental policy, which appears to favour gimmicks over real, meaningful and sustainable solutions*

However, one positive change that has occurred, is that we now have widespread, robust and indisputable evidence of both the damage we humans are causing to the environment and the benefits that the planet and all of its inhabitants, ourselves included, could reap from making significant and sustainable change. For the first time in modern human history, politicians, scientists, entrepreneurs and people all around the world simultaneously agree that change must happen at once and for good, and it's crucial that the benefits reach all parts of our planet. There are obviously some exceptions, Donald Trump for one, whose disdain for the environment has led the US to roll back on numerous domestic policies aimed at curbing climate change and to state their intention to withdraw from the Paris Agreement. Thankfully however, President Trump's views do not seem to represent the majority of the international community on this issue and there are, at last, enough of us calling for serious change that it has the potential to be realised.

This is an extraordinary historic opportunity, the merits and responsibility of this is shared among a variety of actors. SERA is most certainly a strong voice among them, but there are also tenacious NGOs and social enterprises, brilliant and devoted academics, scientists, and public figures that are all deeply committed to the cause. We must also not forget the

# *We have nothing to lose but our planet!*

Internet, the media and the entertainment industry, with their ability to reach millions through their products and campaigns, which are also playing a vital part.

At this point, it would be impossible not to mention the massive impact the BBC's documentary series Blue Planet has had on people's perceptions of the true impact of human activity on the environment and the subsequent rise in expectation for real change. There is no doubt that Blue Planet and the Attenborough effect has highlighted the impact of plastic waste on our oceans and seas. This pollution has been long predicted by leading business people such as Paul Polman, the CEO of UNILEVER, but it has now finally penetrated the public mind-set.

The UK decision to ban the manufacture sale and use of plastic microbeads, inspired by the brilliant report from the Environmental Audit and Select Committee, lead by Mary Creagh MP, has been followed by a serious consultation on a possible plastic waste tax and one on single-use plastics. These are commendable steps but we must shy away from the Michael Gove style approach to environmental policy, which appears to favour gimmicks over real, meaningful and sustainable solutions.

Bans on certain products and new taxes are useful weapons in the fight

for a better environment, but a more strategic and holistic approach must be deployed. As a movement, we must produce a vision that inspires all of us on the environmental and political left to that which will lead to radical policies that deal with the challenge of population growth, water and air pollution, feeding people sustainably and dealing with global warming. These are the seriously big issues and we must come up with evidence-based solutions founded on good science.

SERA has been a channel for new ideas and innovations and a radical voice that recognises the benefits of marrying clear policy objectives based on socialist principles and good science. I am determined that SERA will continue to be that visionary influence on environmental philosophy and provide strong political direction in the vital movement to save our planet.

We have nothing to lose but our planet!

**BARRY SHEERMAN**  
MP was a founding member of SERA in 1973 and is Labour MP for Huddersfield. He tweets at @BarrySheerman



## PLASTIC USE AND REUSE IN THE UK EVERYDAY



## 38.5 MILLION PLASTIC BOTTLES PER DAY



## 15 MILLION OF THESE ARE NOT RECYCLED

ONLY  
**1 in 400**  
COFFEE  
CUPS  
ARE  
RECYCLED





# VOLUNTARY ACTION WILL NEVER BE ENOUGH, WE NEED GOVERNMENT LEGISLATION TO GO PLASTIC-FREE

KERRY MCCARTHY MP

**For those campaigning on marine plastic pollution, so much has changed in such a short time.**

When I first started raising the problem in Parliament some years ago, motivated by my concern for the marine environment, it was hardly on anyone's radar. Huge credit for the shift in public awareness of the problem must surely go to Blue Planet II, which acted as a catalyst to campaigns that have now rapidly gathered momentum. It brought into our homes the extraordinary habitats and wildlife of our seas and oceans, and the terrible damage wrought by plastic pollution. It was this juxtaposition, of beauty and wonder up against man-made destruction, that really hit home with the viewing public. There couldn't be a better time than now to push for change, to create a lasting legacy.

The Government has made the right noises, but action so far has been limited to the "low-hanging fruit", such as the ban on microbeads in cosmetic products (but only of the wash-off variety). When I pointed out during the SI committee approving the ban that such products accounted for only 0.4% of microplastics in our rivers, lakes and oceans, the Minister bristled. The Government has now moved on to talking of ending the sale of plastic straws, stirrers and plastic-stemmed cotton buds (more low-hanging fruit) and has made a very welcome commitment to a deposit return scheme, which it is currently out for consultation and will make a big difference

in stemming the tide of plastic which is littering our streets. But most of the really big decisions have been deferred, primarily to an already much-delayed waste and resources strategy, that is now expected later this year, and the outcome of a Treasury call for evidence on changes to the tax system to reduce single-use plastic – potentially when the level of public concern post Blue Planet II has died down a bit!

No-one is saying it is easy. I know from my work with Surfers Against Sewage on their Plastic-Free Parliament campaign, that even when you find you are pushing on an open door, there are still significant barriers towards ending single-use plastic.

I wrote to the Speaker and the Chair of the Administration Committee about ending the use of single-use plastics across the estate - items such as bottles, cups, straws, stirrers, condiments and cutlery – and replacing them with more sustainable alternatives. It was clear the determination was there, but with significant issues to resolve: from logistical to the increased cost of compostable or sustainable alternatives. While these costs could and should be passed onto the MPs, the In-House Services Team understandably needed to consider the much larger number of people on the Parliamentary estate on lower incomes, from interns and junior researchers to cleaners, security guards and admin staff.

It has just recently announced an ambitious package of measures,

including a latte levy and stopping the sale of single-use plastic water bottles, which sets an important example, which I hope other institutions will emulate.

I have also been writing to supermarkets and brands about their plastic footprint, publicising this correspondence on the facebook.com/LetsStopPlasticPollution page that I set up with Thangam Debbonaire MP.

I've noticed that some of the weakest replies I've received have been from the big chains, and some of the most impressive outriders have been small businesses.

Take coffee shops. Boston Tea Party, which has six stores in Bristol, has taken a lead on promising to ban all single use coffee cups later this year. With its takeaway coffee sales totaling over one million pounds each year, its owners are taking the risk on this decision seriously hitting its bottom line.

By comparison, the priorities of the big coffee chains that are working together as part of the Paper Cup Alliance seem primarily those of a PR nature: to re-brand the 'coffee cups' as 'paper cups', and to get better recognition of them as recyclable. In theory they are, except the hard-to-detach plastic lining in them means they can only be recycled in just 5 specialist facilities in the UK. If they are disposed of in normal local authority kerbside collections, they will be pulled out and put in landfill or incinerated. Which is why just 0.25% of coffee cups are recycled in the UK.



# *There couldn't be a better time than now to push for change, to create a lasting legacy*

## OPINION

Some progress has been made by the Alliance in piloting cup collection in separate bins and making them into products such as garden pots. But it has clearly discounted sourcing a cup that can be recycled through normal collections (such as the one that's been developed by Frugalpac) or increasing the cost of a coffee in a disposable cup, which, research has shown, would have a much greater effect on encouraging customers to bring a reusable cup than the current 25p or even 50p discounts. For some reason disincentives are more powerful than incentives. The introduction of a 5p charge on plastic carrier bags, insignificant though it is for most shoppers in monetary terms, resulted in a drop in their use of a staggering 85%.

*For some reason disincentives are more powerful than incentives. The introduction of a 5p charge on plastic carrier bags... resulted in a drop in their use of a staggering 85%*

There is a huge variation in the level of ambition in other sectors. Clearly retailers are making more of an effort with their own-brands (although with significant differences between them) and hats off to Iceland which has set itself an ambitious goal eliminating plastic packaging from all its own-brand products by 2023.

A voluntary UK Plastics Pact was recently announced by 42 businesses to cut plastic rubbish, which includes an aspiration that by 2025 all plastic packaging can be reused, recycled or composted. But as with all these voluntary agreements to reduce environmental impact - which

the Government, for ideological reasons prefers - there is no transparency, and no enforcement mechanism for meeting targets. And only recently, WRAP - the body that has to deliver on this agenda for the Government - has had to make a tenth of its staff redundant because of funding cuts.

Voluntary action alone - be it from businesses or consumers - is never going to be enough to achieve the reduction of plastic waste that we all want to see. We should legislate to make sure that targets are set and are met, and everyone plays their part in meeting them. Without smart regulation, the best practice businesses will continue to lose out commercially to the environmental laggards.

The EU's recycling targets have been essential for driving progress on recycling. Last year, I asked the Environment Minister why the UK's recycling rate had stagnated and whether the Government was opposing an EU target to recycle 65% of municipal waste by 2035. Even the UK's own estimates have found that such a target would save almost £10bn over a decade in the waste sector, greenhouse gas and social costs. She wouldn't confirm or deny the UK was opposing the targets in negotiations and blamed everyone but the Government for the UK's poor performance, particularly local authorities and consumers.

Targets alone will not be sufficient. We urgently need a new framework for producer responsibility, which better incentivises producers to reduce their waste and to design products which are easier to recycle and recover, as well as to raise costs on packaging that is difficult to recycle. The prevalence of black plastic, Lucozade bottles with their plastic sleeves, and Cillit Bang cleaning products (which have a safety mechanism which prevents the whole plastic bottle from getting recycled) all point to the weakness of the current system.

I would also like to see manufacturers paying significantly more towards the recycling of products they are putting on the market. The Government used to boast that the UK's system of producer responsibility was run at the lowest cost to business in the EU - but this does not mean for society, as cash-starved local authorities and taxpayers are paying for 90% of the costs of collection. A complete reversal of the polluter pays principle!

We need to see a radical Waste and Resources Strategy, which addresses the stagnating rates of recycling, the inefficiencies arising from so many different recycling collection systems in operation, and the pitiful state of our recycling infrastructure in this country, which means that much of our waste is exported abroad. The recent China ban on imports of plastic and paper from the U.K. may be the crunch point we need to persuade the Government to act.

We also need the Government to embrace the new economic opportunities that would come from moving towards a Circular Economy. The future lies not in the mass consumption of single-use disposable items, or low-cost products using finite resources, which are designed to fail after their warranty expires, but in products that are designed and manufactured for reuse or recycling. We could be world leaders in this field. Now is the time for the Government to seize the moment and make sure that we are.

**KERRY MCCARTHY**  
MP is a member of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee and Environmental Audit Committee. She is Labour MP for Bristol East. Kerry tweets at @KerryMP



# BEYOND PLASTIC PACKAGING *AND THE PLASTIC PACT*

LIBBY PEAKE

**Since Theresa May announced, in January, that the government would show global leadership in tackling plastic waste, announcements on the topic have come thick and fast. Last month, the Treasury launched a long awaited call for evidence on taxing single use plastics, followed by a promise from Environment Secretary Michael Gove that England would definitely institute a deposit return scheme to capture more plastic bottles for recycling. Earlier this month, to coincide with a meeting of the Commonwealth nations, he added that England would seek to ban disposable single use plastics like straw stirrers and cotton buds.**

And tonight, the environment secretary will be on the case again, helping to launch the UK Plastic Pact, a voluntary business led initiative aiming to create “a world where plastic is valued and never pollutes the environment”. Participating companies are promising, by 2025, to: “eliminate problematic or unnecessary single use packaging”; make 100 per cent of plastic packaging reusable, recyclable or compostable; ensure 70 per cent is effectively recycled or composted; and include 30 per cent recycled content across all plastic packaging.

These are all great developments, and we’re pleased that a number of steps Green Alliance has been calling for to prevent plastic waste are being implemented by a government that has promised “action at every stage of the production and consumption of plastic” to end this “great environmental scourge”.

But, so far, government attention has focused almost exclusively on packaging and other single use consumer items. This is a sensible place to start, and not just because these plastics are the most visible to people. According to our research, they also account for the largest proportion of plastics reaching the ocean from developed economies like the UK. As such, a successful deposit return scheme (we are still waiting for exact proposals for England) would prevent a third of UK plastic pollution from ever reaching the sea.

But that still leaves two thirds of the problem to solve. Our research has identified several other major categories of marine plastic litter that could easily be addressed by targeted government intervention. The most obvious that need solutions are: tyre dust, which accounts for 18 per cent of the problem; maritime waste, at 11 per cent; preproduction plastic pellets, known as nurdles, which are nine per cent; and synthetic microfibres, another nine per cent. We’ve outlined elsewhere some effective measures to tackle most of these sources, but there has been little movement so far to act.

And, with the global use of plastic expected to continue to skyrocket in coming decades, more action is urgently needed to ensure single use plastics are truly reduced as far as possible, moving from recycling to higher up the waste hierarchy. Simple steps the government could take would include creating a comprehensive network of public water fountains (so no one needs to buy bottle after bottle of water) and introducing charges for plastic-lined coffee cups (along

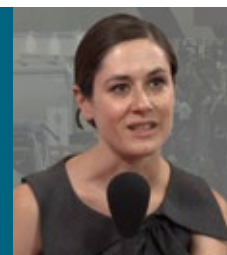
the lines of the carrier bag charge) to drive the large scale behaviour change needed to reduce our overall use of plastic.

A large proportion of marine pollution results from plastics entering watercourses in countries lacking basic waste management infrastructure. Many of these are in Southeast Asia, where the UK sends a large proportion of its plastic waste, so there’s a UK interest in making sure other countries have adequate sanitation and waste management services. This would cut plastic pollution and also have major benefits for public health. So it is certainly welcome that the government’s 25 year environment plan has committed to do “more to help developing nations tackle pollution and reduce plastic waste, including through UK aid”.

Earlier this month, a £61 million fund was announced to help Commonwealth nations tackle plastic pollution. This includes £16.4 million for improving waste management infrastructure, which is a great first step.

The sea change needed to tackle the scourge of plastic has started, and today’s announcement is another step in the right direction. But to really end plastic pollution there’s still a way to go. Watch this space.

LIBBY PEAKE works for the charity and independent environmental think tank Green Alliance.



# TACKLING PLASTIC WASTE *POST-BREXIT*

KATE GREEN MP

**It has been good to see rising levels of public interest and concern about the damage that the careless disposal of plastics is doing to our environment. There can be no question that this subject is important: the sheer scale of our consumption of plastics makes this issue a priority for government. Yet despite the success of measures such as the five pence charge on plastic bags, banning the use of microbeads in cosmetic and other products, and recent warm words from ministers about banning plastic straws and cotton buds, our levels of recycling fall woefully short of what is needed. In the UK alone, we use around 38.5 million plastic bottles a day, yet 15 million of these are not recycled, while 700,000 a year are littered. Meanwhile, we throw away over 2.5 billion disposable coffee cups every year, with only 1 in 400 being recycled.**

Unfortunately, the UK government's response in the face of this environmental crisis is depressingly unambitious. In January, the government announced that it aimed to eliminate avoidable plastic waste by 2042 – but the damage that can be done in that time will be enormous. Ministers resisted bolder targets proposed by the European Union, which has set out a vision for all plastics to be reusable or recyclable by 2030. Half of plastic waste generated in the EU is to be recycled, with a fourfold increase in recycling capacity.

Even where specific action is contemplated by the UK government, it is progressing desperately slowly. While ministers are reported to be considering a bottle deposit and retention scheme, so far, there is talk

only of a consultation on the subject. It's hardly surprising therefore that the respected Commons Environmental Audit Committee has said the UK government is dragging its feet on this matter.

*The Government should adopt a producer responsibility compliance fee structure to stimulate use of recycled plastic, reward recyclability, and increase costs on packaging that is difficult or impossible to recycle*

If the UK's approach now can be seen as lacking sufficient seriousness or urgency, we should be even more concerned about what might happen after Brexit. The EU's 2030 vision is backed by a range of policies and strategies which will help it to achieve its targets. While the EU is expected to bring forward new draft legislation on single use plastic later in 2018, a host of other measures also bear directly or indirectly on the level of plastics use and recycling. These include a proposed drinking water directive which would expand the availability of free drinking water in public places, a new marine strategy framework, new legislation in relation to waste disposal and recycling, a new directive on waste shipments and waste disposal arrangements at ports, and revisions to the packaging waste directive.

Directives on disposal of vehicles at end of life, construction products and urban waste water will also have an impact. Yet the UK's adherence to such measures after Brexit cannot be guaranteed, and indeed the UK government appears to be dragging its heels in giving effect to some of these measures in the UK, under the pretext that all is to be settled by the Brexit negotiations.

Of course, it might be that the need to continue to trade with our European neighbours after Brexit will ensure that the UK continues to meet EU standards. But we could have more confidence that our ministers would aim to achieve best practice and the highest standards after Brexit if we could already see more energy being put into a wide-ranging strategy and policy solutions. For there is plenty that could and should be done now by the UK government to drive a reduction in avoidable plastic waste.

For a start, the public sector and public bodies should lead by example. Every government department and public authority should have its own targets for reducing its internal levels of avoidable plastic waste, while public buildings should provide access to free drinking water fountains.

Local authorities have a large role to play, but the pressure of cuts has meant that recycling rates have plateaued, and household recycling rates are deteriorating. The Government should therefore set a post-2020 recycling rate of 65%, and secure the necessary investment in UK recycling facilities. Nor should we overlook the role of our city mayors, some of whom are

## *Ministers need to position the reduction of avoidable plastic waste as part of a broader environmental strategy at the heart of government*

already taking bold steps to set out their own environmental plans and introducing a range of important new measures.

Fiscal measures are also needed. The Government should adopt a producer responsibility compliance fee structure to stimulate use of recycled plastic, reward recyclability, and increase costs on packaging that is difficult or impossible to recycle. This would incentivise producers to use more sustainable packaging.

The use of disposable coffee cups is attracting increasing levels of public concern, and the government should respond to the Environmental Audit Committee's call for the introduction of a 'latte levy', with coffee shops required to have facilities in each of their outlets for used cups to be recycled. Local authorities should consider how to reflect this in planning and licensing conditions.

Individual behaviours clearly have an important part to play, and government support for national and local public education campaigns is needed. Ethical business practices are also important, and voluntary efforts by the business community should be rewarded. Ministers should challenge the plastics, packaging, retail and leisure industries, among others, to take the lead in developing waste reduction solutions, and in sending a message about the importance of recycling to their consumers. Food retailer Iceland has already announced it will eliminate plastic packaging from all its own brand products by the end of 2023, and other retail chains should be challenged to do likewise.

Most important of all, ministers need to position the reduction of avoidable plastic waste as part of a broader environmental strategy at the heart of government. That requires a comprehensive, holistic approach that recognises the scale and breadth of the threat to future prosperity, health, peace, and progress in reducing global inequalities, if we fail to grasp the environmental challenge that our world now faces. That threat is exacerbated by the actions of US President Trump, who has said he will pull the USA out of the Paris international climate agreement, and has taken steps to cut back the US Environmental Protection Agency. UK ministers need to take advantage of his forthcoming visit to this country to put pressure on him to reverse his reckless stance on environmental matters.

But the UK's authority for doing so requires a comprehensive, domestic strategy, and plans to meet a much more ambitious set of targets, including plastics reduction. In the absence of urgency from the government, however, it is Labour that is taking the policy lead in this matter. Labour has always understood that pro-environment policy is both politically popular and socially just: the key to sustainable growth and prosperity in the future. That is what the next Labour government will deliver.

**KATE GREEN MP** is a member of the European Scrutiny Committee and Labour MP for Stretford and Urmston. She tweets at @KateGreenSU





# WETWIPE AND FATBERG: A REAL STAIN ON THE ENVIRONMENT

DEBBIE LEACH

**"So where are the wet wipes?" asked the TV reporter, a little testily. "You're standing on them" I answered. It was the Thames foreshore at low tide and the cameraman had set up equipment on a low mound. I bent down, nudged the mound with my (gloved) hand and pulled gently. A long, mud-coloured, fraying length of intertwined dirty rags began to unravel from the river silt in front of their horrified eyes. It would be an understatement to say that the riverbed is carpeted with wet wipes; rather that the riverbed is constructed from them. This is the dark side of the River Thames; where used and flushed wet wipes have rapidly become an intrinsic element of our natural world.**

The Thames is London's greatest natural asset. It attracts millions of visitors each year and takes centre stage on many international films, including James Bond. This is where we should be showcasing how the UK values and protects its natural environment. The River Thames should be shining a light on Best Practice. Instead, it highlights an ever-escalating problem; humanity's reliance on single-use plastic.

Where wet wipes snag on a twig or protuberance on the river bed they gather up others, building in layers into lumpy, unhygienic and disgusting mounds in one of the most famous rivers in the world. This unseen plastic menace is under our very feet at locations where school groups visit, rowers and paddle-boarders glide serenely by, and which are home to juvenile fish nurseries of European importance. This is not a healthy environment for anyone.

The wet wipe is one of the most rapidly increasing items of single-use plastic that people use. While it looks rather like a tissue and as harmless as loo paper – they are anything but. We must all be cautious when the packet tells says 'flushable'. While flushing might appear doable, it is a really bad idea for our environment.

The plastic fibres in wet wipes create a durable item that will never completely disappear. Some of them will be discharged into the Thames when rainfall causes the sewerage system of central London to overflow into the river - which happens about once a week. More will be cleared from the screens of sewage treatment plants and taken to be buried in landfill. Even more wet wipes accumulate within our drainage network and eventually make their presence felt in foul and devastating ways.

If wet wipes were humans they would be dubbed 'extremely sociable', because once released into the wild via your loo, they mingle. They cling. They attract others. They never leave. And when combined with fat poured down the drains, they create a monster – a Fatberg.

The Fatberg is a misshapen, pallid, solid mass of wet wipes and congealed fat created within the drainage system, from what we pour and flush into it. The Fatberg can grow to colossal proportions, weighing up to 10 or 15 tonnes, before it finally breaks the sewers. It attracts a horrified fascination. This beast growing and lurking in the pipework under the ground causes great damage, distress from the

sewage forced up into neighbourhoods, and it is extremely costly to get rid of.

The wet wipes that congregate in the side sewers are more insidious, but just as dangerous. The blockages can result in flooding that devastates homes, pushes sewage into rivers and wreaks havoc on wildlife.

The sheer scale of the wet wipe problem is truly astounding. Every day, thirty-one tonnes of wet wipes are now cleared from the screens at Beckton Sewage Treatment Plant – and that is at just one single treatment plant.

Since 2005, I have been lucky enough to run Thames21, the environmental charity working with communities and partners to ensure that we both protect and benefit from our network of rivers. With our feet quite literally in the river, delivering practical river improvements with thousands of local volunteers, Thames21 experiences first-hand the challenges our rivers face.

Our Thames River Watch programme trains and supports members of the public to survey and monitor the health of the river Thames, collecting data on pollution from single use plastic bottles, to raw sewage overflows. The public are passionate about the river and by examining its depths, its fringes and the detritus it transports, Thames River Watch identifies some of the issues affecting not only the river, but the wider environment.

Increasingly concerned at the volume of wet wipes we were finding in the river,



Thames River Watch began specific surveys to document the scale of the problem. Last year our team visited a site at Hammersmith Bridge where transect surveys of the Thames foreshore recorded the highest number of wet wipes ever in a single place: 4500 in a 154sqm area. We returned to the site this year and despite the thousands we removed the year before, Thames21 counted even more with the initial tally more than 5000 wet wipes. Wet wipes are accumulating in mounds with an average density of around 100 wet wipes per square metre. This number is sickening and cannot be allowed to continue.

Thames21 volunteers often use the Jam Jar Shake test to show just how hard it is to get a wet wipe to break down. Simply fill two jam jars with water, put some loo paper in one and a wet wipe in the other, and shake. The loo paper will disintegrate within seconds, but the wet wipe remains robust minutes later. No one needs a single use wipe so strong.

We need to stamp out the notion that single-use items are all the better for a bit of plastic.

We can tell from the raggedy wet wipes embedded in the Thames foreshore that, yes, eventually they do start to break down but only to cause a whole new swathe of problems. The synthetic polymers they contain are released into rivers and oceans as microplastics, which can be eaten easily by wildlife from tiny organisms to large

marine mammals. In the River Thames, an average of seven out of every ten flounder living in the river have plastic in their stomachs. It is an appalling reality and one we must immediately seek to rectify.

It is our collective responsibility to tackle this.

We need to drive public awareness of the damage wet wipes are causing to our rivers and the wildlife they support. We need to advocate for reusable wipes to be more widely available on the market. At a minimum until reusable wipes are the norm, we must educate people to no longer flush disposables.

*Last year whilst our team surveyed a site near Hammersmith we found the highest number of wet wipes ever in a single place: 4500 in a 154sqm area. Despite clearing them, this year we came back to find over 5000 wet wipes*

Systemic change is also needed. Manufacturers should ensure that their products are clearly and correctly labelled. If it contains any plastic, it is not flushable. There should be clear legal consequences for manufacturers who mislead consumers and fail to educate of best disposable methods via their packaging.

Equally, and perhaps more importantly, industry needs work more quickly on providing plastic-free alternatives. The public appetite for making the switch to reusables is there, but investment in new and sustainable technologies is what's needed now because the way wet wipes are damaging our rivers is not acceptable. Change is needed at every level, and it is needed now.

**Thames21** is the voice for London's waterways, working with communities to improve rivers and canals for people and wildlife.

They mobilise thousands of volunteers every year to clean and green the capital's 400 mile network of waterways.



**DEBBIE LEACH** is Chief Executive at Thames21





# FASHION AND MICROPLASTICS

CHRISTINA TIRAN



**While the fashion industry in the UK is one of the biggest in the world, it is debated little in politics and even less attention is given to its environmental footprint. In recent years, many studies show the dangerous effects of micro-pollution in our oceans come from our very own wardrobes. We need a systematic rethink of what materials we produce.**

Unlike natural fibres, synthetics do not biodegrade. A recent report by the Ellen MacArthur Foundation showed that 30% of micro plastic pollution comes from washing synthetic textiles. In practice this means that every time we wash a synthetic garment in the comfort of our homes, tiny plastic fibres are released. They find their way into the water system, slip through filters and end up in our oceans.

*We need a push from policy to phase out plastic...*

Acrylic fibre is one of the worst polluters when washed. According to a study from Plymouth University, a single wash of garments made from acrylic fibres can release over 700,000 microfibrils into the ocean. While the wider effects are not yet fully understood, experts suggest that these tiny synthetic shreds of fibre can have wider implications than the recently

banned microbeads from the cosmetic industry. Some of the studies show that microfibrils have altered organisms and can end up poisoning the food chain. Plastic is likely to already be part of our food system.

The industry hypes recycling as the most popular solution to counter the trend of ever producing more synthetics from finite resources. However, this practice is only useful in transition. Garments made from recycled polyester also shed microscopic fibres. The aim must be to produce biocompatible materials from the start. We should all agree that such harmful materials should not be produced in the first place. Especially for products with such a short lifespan.

Politics needs to help counter this, and political voices are slowly being heard. Labour MP Dr. Lisa Cameron, chair of the recently formed All-Party Parliamentary Group on Textiles and Fashion, stated 'there needs to be a strong policy agenda on the use of microfibrils' and scientists from the University of Plymouth will receive £200,000 from the government to research the impact of microplastic on marine life in aid of this goal.

A simple ban is not a solution. Synthetic fibres currently comprise over 60% of the annual fibre production worldwide. Conventional cotton, the second most popular fibre in the industry, is the most pesticide intensive crop and has

reached its planetary boundaries. Action is needed from all sides – the industry, the individual and policy.

The Sustainable Angle, a non-political, NPO, organises showcases and gives workshops, demonstrates that one promising approach to remedy the problem is to diversify the fibre basket. Alternatives to synthetic fibres are already on the market.

Fabrics made from waste have true potential. Orange and apple peel, or grape waste don't deplete natural resources. Or Tencel, a viscose like material, is produced in a closed loop and is derived from FSC wood sources, is biodegradable. All of these materials offer a cleaner, less harmful substitute to the textiles currently in use and are in production. The industry needs a push to start using them.

We are facing a plastic crisis polluting and endangering our nutrition base. Recycling is not the solution. We need a push from policy to phase out plastic. The transition will have to be gradual, but we need to start now.

CHRISTINA TIRAN  
is a project  
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Sustainable Angle.  
She tweets at  
@christinatiran







# EVERYTHING IS CONNECTED

DAVID NEWMAN

**"Plastics plastics everywhere but ne'er a drop to ...recycle". Samuel Taylor Coleridge's Ancient Mariner would never recognise the means of today, shows how much things have changed in our own times. Yes, plastics are everywhere and the UK is well, well, well, the sea. The logical conclusion is that things are going to get worse before it gets better.**

Let's be clear: most plastic waste finishing in the environment is due to poor waste management systems in developing countries. The failure of waste management across 70% of the Planet is causing this mess. But we are also contributing here in the wealthy countries like Britain due to failures in waste collection, allowing littering, encouraging the use of throw-away materials. Blue Planet II has awoken our conscience on the issue of marine pollution, now what to do about it?

It is complicated, but let's try to explain.

Designed to be thrown away afterwards, no-one back in the 1950s and 1960s dreamt of plastic recycling when plastics first became ubiquitous. It was to be thrown away, full stop. Then came the first environmental policies in the 1970s and 1980s which focused attention upon the need to manage waste rather than simply

dump it as we did until then. Finally, as we focused on the limits of resources on the Planet, we started to recycle. Meanwhile plastic production grew and grew, now reaching over 300 million tonnes a year.

Plastics are cheap, which is why they are so successful, so plastic waste logically also has little or no value. Certain specific very clean streams, like PET bottles (water bottles) when collected separately, and kept clean, can be resold and recycled. There are seven main types of plastic polymer but within these categories thousands of variations, as polymers are mixed, stuck together, stuck on paper or aluminium. So effectively, you can only really recycle one or two types, PET and HDPE as long as they are clean and not contaminated with other materials and products, like foodstuffs.

However, most plastics are contaminated either by the material they are stuck to, like paper; or by what they contain, like food. This is why recycling plastic is so hard. Moreover, if you collect plastics with other materials, like paper, glass, cardboard, you will get contamination from these in the mix, reducing the recyclability of each of them. Currently the UK claims to recycle some one third of all plastics entering the market but the reality is very different. Indeed, plastic films such as carrier bags and wrapping, are barely recycled at all. Overall plastic recycling, by which I mean effectively actually recycled in a plant and coming out again as a plastic polymer, I would think it no more than 15% of all plastic waste in the UK.

Let's add to this another layer of information. Where does the recycling really take place? Actually we find that the plastics collected for recycling effectively have been sent abroad, mostly to China. Indeed, half of our "collected for recycling plastics" have gone East for decades. The environmental standards and conditions in which they are recycled there are disastrous for the local habitat, with waste plastic ending up in rivers, burning plastic emitting smoke and toxins into the atmosphere, and local populations inhaling the emissions. Partly for this reason in 2018 China stopped these imports.

Which leaves us up the river without the proverbial paddle.

Meanwhile we are collecting for recycling materials which can barely be recycled due to contamination, have zero value, and for which we do not have the recycling facilities anyway. Want to know the secret? Most of this plastic is going to incineration to produce energy or to our landfills, or being baled and sent to incinerators in northern Europe.

Another major waste stream is impacted by plastic waste: food waste. Throughout the UK (but not in all of England) households separately collect their food waste which gets sent to composting or to anaerobic digestion where it produces biogas, that can be used as a fuel for heating, for making electricity, or for transport. About 800,000 tonnes out of the 7.5 million tonnes of food waste arising in the UK are separately collected and go to treatment. The rest goes to landfill and incinerators.



Much of the food waste gets collected with plastic bags - these are stripped out at the plant and sent to landfill or incineration. About 10% of the food waste collected in weight is plastics, and as plastics cannot be composted or made into biogas, they need to be eliminated from the processes. This costs a lot of money both in the process and for disposal costs. I calculate some £27 million a year currently in plastic waste elimination in food waste collections. But each time plastics are stripped out they leave residues which remain in the biogas by-product (digestate) or in the compost. Microplastics then end up on our soils. Regulations allow an incredible 11 kilos of microplastics per hectare of land to be legally spread to soil - seems not much? But 11 kilos is about 1000 carrier bags. Imagine seeing a field covered in a thousand carrier bags, imagine what it looks like. Except with microplastics, you can't see them so easily.

Hmmm, complicated eh? Plastics no-one wants to recycle, food waste contaminated by plastics, fields full of plastics.

Add a third layer to this. Soil quality. We produce 95% of our food from the land. Given the importance of soil to us all, you'd think we'd protect it as a precious resource no? Wrong. We deplete in the UK alone nearly three million tonnes of topsoil a year, washed away due to intensive farming and not replaced. Once upon a time farming was less intensive, but also animals lived on the farm and their manure went back to soil. No longer so much, and according to Mr Gove, our Minister, we have just some 30 years of crops left in the soil before we have exhausted it.

So? What has this to do with plastics?

Plastics, food waste, compost, soil, food. It is a chain. If we pollute our soils with microplastics we will produce less food and/or contaminate it; if we instead collected our food waste (about 90% now is not collected) cleanly, without plastics contamination, and send it to composting and back to soil as compost, we could re-establish the chain of replenishing our soil. Indeed, we could more or less get three million tonnes a year out of all the food waste we throw away and back to soil. Bingo!

We'd also solve a lot of other problems. Less CO2 emissions from landfills (when food rots in a landfill it emits greenhouse gases); less incineration of food and less CO2 emissions (burning anything emits greenhouse gas emissions); less plastic waste, as eliminating food waste from mixed waste makes sorting and recycling the other waste easier.

To get clean food waste collection however, we cannot continue to use plastics. Other countries, such as Italy and Belgium, use a new generation of certified compostable bio-plastics which compost naturally with the food and breakdown into water and humus. They are not to be confused with cheap alternatives pretending to be biodegradable, we need to ensure they are effectively certified compostable with a UK standard known as EN13432. This would eliminate soil pollution from microplastics. We need biobags for the collection of food waste, urgently.

Sounds hard? Yes, it is not easy, but if the Italians, Belgians, Catalonians, Californians, and many others can collect their food waste separately, cleanly and compost it, so can we.

As for the plastics that cannot go through this route, we should tax them so that the tax income can pay for them to be collected, not littered, recycled, not dumped, and treated here in the UK where we make and use them, not sent on a ship to Cambodia or Vietnam hoping for the best. Did you know that currently plastics producers in the UK pay an environmental tax to pay for collection that is roughly one tenth of those of other major European economies? Shameful.

You see, it is all connected. And in the end it all comes down to money. As no-one ever wants to spend anything, then we need Government to legislate to compel change. Otherwise, forget going to the beach in a few years time, there won't be any room.

**DAVID NEWMAN**  
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# LOCAL GOVERNMENT TAKING ACTION ON PLASTIC

CLLR RACHEL BLAKE

**Up and down the country, an exciting debate is taking place around the use of plastic. We know the amount of plastic waste generated annually in the UK is estimated to be nearly 5 million tonnes. What does that look like in terms of everyday items; well 13 billion plastic carrier bags are used in the UK each year. With plastic taking up to 500 years to decompose, the current status quo with the use of plastic is just not sustainable.**

As more people become better informed about the stark reality of plastic, the debate will shift towards local and national governments role in tackling this issue. A recent Ipsos MORI / King's College Polling Club survey found the public were concerned about plastic waste but that the public were less willing to take responsibility for a solution. Instead, they thought companies that produced packaged good (27%) should lead the charge in tackling this. Government came in at 11% and only 3% of consumers felt it was on them to take action. Interestingly, the poll showed 40% of people felt a collaborative approach was the way forward.

While there is still much work to do at a national level to reduce the amount of single use plastics in our waste stream, local councillors are well placed to start tackling the issue. Local councillors are well placed in their communities,

building links with local businesses and parks to reduce the use of plastic.

To adopt a collaborative approach, local authorities can work with residents to bring public awareness to the need to recycle and the correct way to use waste and recycling systems. There needs to be a clear understanding of what constitutes single-use plastics and how households can dispose such plastics.

Anyone who has tried a 'day without plastic' will know how hard it is to avoid single use plastics. Removing these from our waste stream will require action at international and national level to work with the retail industry to introduce tougher regulations on packaging and plastics, make it easier for people to recycle plastic and clearer which plastics can be recycled.

As well as signing up to national campaigns to reduce packaging waste, there are actions we can take in local government to tackle use of plastics - drawing on our range of powers and our connections to local communities. In Tower Hamlets, we have one of the fastest growing populations, some of London's most visited tourist attractions and most popular parks as well as a major business district at Canary Wharf and so generate a high level of plastic waste and want to do our part tackling the issue.

We set out ambitious proposals in our manifesto to reduce the use of plastics locally including introducing water fountains to reduce the use of water bottles and working with local businesses to set up a local 'keep a cup' scheme. We currently have 11 water fountains locally and want to identify other locations where we can install water fountains to encourage people to keep a bottle with them and top up. London's Mayor Sadiq Khan is supportive of this approach and we are hopeful that this can make a real impact.

***SERA are encouraging Labour Councils to pass a motion affirming their commitment to tackle plastic waste. Talk to your local Labour councillor about taking action to go #PlasticFree.***

A draft council motion can be found on SERA's website at [SERA.org.uk/plastics](https://sera.org.uk/plastics)

CLLR RACHEL BLAKE is Tower Hamlets Deputy Mayor for Regeneration and Air Quality. She tweets at @RNBlake



**JOIN US AND HELP MAKE A DIFFERENCE**  
[www.sera.org.uk](https://www.sera.org.uk) @serauk serauk



**TIME TO ACT**

# A MOTION TO TAKE TO A CLP

*As part of SERA's push on plastics we want to encourage the Labour Party to be more ambitious.*

With plastic at the top of the political and environmental agenda and the Conservative government taking little if any concrete action, we want Labour to think about plastic pollution within the Party which we hope will enable conversations and a cultural shift paving the way for green world leading progressive policy.

Join SERA in our fight to tackle plastics  
Go to [SERA.org.uk/plastic](https://sera.org.uk/plastic) to find out more



This motion has already been passed by over 30 CLPs across the country - please take the motion to your CLP, take a vote and let SERA know when it has been passed by sending an email to our organiser Phillip at [phillip.fenton@sera.org.uk](mailto:phillip.fenton@sera.org.uk) and tweeting SERA at @serauk with the hashtag #PlasticFree.



## THE LABOUR PARTY'S USE OF PLASTIC

### This branch/GC notes:

That the use of plastic when not properly recycled has a detrimental impact on our environment.  
That the Labour Party is currently using a large unquantifiable volume of plastic and currently does not have a plan or strategy in place to phase out its use.

### This branch/GC believes:

That the Labour Party should be leading the way and setting an example as an organisation that does not use plastic where ever possible.

### This branch/GC resolves:

That the CLP Chair and Secretary are to write to the Labour Party General Secretary and Shadow Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs to request that an audit take place on how much plastic the national party has used in the last 12 months and to come up with a plan of action to phase out its use with the findings to be presented to conference.

**TIME  
TO GO  
PLASTIC  
FREE**



# QUICK WINS

## WHAT YOU CAN DO TODAY



### ON THE GO

- Always carry a refillable bottle – never buy single-use plastic water bottles
- Make your sandwiches before you go, don't buy sandwiches in plastic wrappers
- Make your pasta or other lunch before you go – avoid those plastic pots
- Never buy anything with plastic knives and forks included

### AT HOME – THE KITCHEN

- Always challenge shops about the amount of packaging – they are getting the message but hearing it regularly really helps. Say it in the shop, say it by email, tweet your views at them
- Buy loose fruit and veg whenever you can and store it in the fridge to preserve it
- If fruit or veg comes in trays, try and choose cardboard rather than plastic. Never buy anything in a black plastic tray – it cannot be recycled
- Try a fruit and veg delivery specialist, who will take the cardboard delivery boxes away and re-use them hundreds of times
- Choose cardboard packaging over plastic every time
- Choose teabags that have no plastic in them
- Switch to having your milk and fruit juice delivered in fully reusable glass bottles, collected and taken away by your local milk delivery company to re-use hundreds of times

### ADVICE FROM

LEONIE COOPER AM

Leonie is deputy chair of the London Assembly Environment Committee and the Labour Assembly member for Merton and Wandsworth



### AT WORK

- Have water on tap and ban single use plastic bottles from desks – encourage staff to have re-usable ones, perhaps with your company logo
- Get any plastic cups replaced with paper ones – or re-usable, washable plastic cups
- Get any plastic knives and forks replaced with bamboo ones, if you have a canteen – or have the usual metal washable ones
- Get plastic plates replaced with paper or one of the many bamboo varieties – or have ones you can wash up

### AT HOME – THE BATHROOM/ PERSONAL HYGIENE

- Ditch the plastic stemmed cotton buds
- Ditch the wet wipes and the baby wipes – and never flush them, they form fatbergs
- Ditch the liquid soap - unless you use the container and refill it
- Choose products that say the plastic used in the containers is recycled plastic
- Go for real nappies – join a nappy laundering service

## IF YOU DO END UP WITH PLASTIC, DON'T FORGET TO RECYCLE IT!

*If we all did just the above the waste of fossil fuels on producing plastics which then end up polluting the ocean or in landfill/incineration would drop massively.*

# JOIN US AND SUPPORT SERA IN OUR FIGHT TO TACKLE PLASTICS

[www.sera.org.uk](http://www.sera.org.uk)

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