

December 2021

Supplementary Briefing

UK legislation only addresses 4 of the top 10 types of plastic pollution.

Table 1 – Estimates for how much plastic pollution is addressed by current UK legislation as of December 2021.

Type of plastic pollution*	Estimated contribution to total plastic pollution*	Addressed by measures in the Environment Bill or other legislation?
Beverage 'litter' pollution	33%	Partially. Deposit Return Schemes, Extended Producer Responsibility and increased recycling rates could slow the projected growth in pollution from food and drink packaging. The Environment Act introduces powers to charge for single-use plastic items, which may be applied to plastic cups. The Plastic Packaging Tax will place a disincentive on plastic bottles which contain less than 30% recycled plastic, but many businesses are already committing to levels of recycled content beyond 30% ¹ and the tax will not be implemented until April 2022 (nearly 1.5 years behind the EU). The government is considering banning the supply of expanded and extruded polystyrene cups and food and beverage containers in England by April 2023 (2 years behind the EU) in their consultation launched on 18 November 2021. ¹
Tyre & brake dust	18%	No.
Maritime waste	11%	Partially. Voluntary schemes have been suggested for some maritime plastic pollution. Extended Producer Responsibility schemes could disincentive the discard of fishing gear.
Pre-production plastics pellets aka 'nurdles'	9%	No. There is a voluntary scheme - Operation Clean Sweep - but nurdles remain a significant source of plastic pollution.
Synthetic fibres	9%	No. An Extended Producer Responsibility scheme for the textiles industry could boost reuse. A requirement in law for manufacturers to fit microplastic fibre catching filters in all new washing machines could help reduce the flow of microfibres into our environment. ²
Other plastic 'litter' pollution	9%	No. The Plastic Packaging Tax will place a disincentive on plastic packaging which contain less than 30% recycled plastic, but many businesses are already committing to levels of recycled content beyond 30% ³ and the tax will not be implemented until April 2022 (nearly 1.5 years behind the EU). The government is considering banning the supply of single-use plastic plates, cutlery, balloon sticks, and expanded and extruded polystyrene cups and food and beverage containers in England by April 2023 (2 years behind the EU) in their consultation launched on 18 November 2021. ¹

Cigarettes	5%	No. A future Extended Producer Responsibility scheme for tobacco products could reduce pollution from cigarettes. The government launched a call for evidence on problematic plastics such as tobacco filters on 18 November 2021. ⁴
Plastic dust	4%	No. Plastic dusts released in the repairs and maintenance of plastic-coated household durables (e.g. home appliances and furniture) and building materials tend to be missed as a source of microplastics.
Plastic bags	1%	Partially. The Plastic Bag Levy has driven a reduction in single-use supermarket check-out bags but has also resulted in an increase in waste and pollution from reusable 'bags-for-life'.
Microbeads	1%	Partially. Plastic microbeads are banned in 'rinse-off' products like shampoo and toothpaste but continue to be allowed in a majority of uses such as cosmetics, sunscreens and paints.

*Categories and contribution estimates taken from [Green Alliance infographic](#) based on [Boomerang Institute research](#).

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REFERENCES

- [1] Single-use plastic: banning the supply of commonly littered single-use plastic items: <https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/single-use-plastic-banning-the-supply-of-commonly-littered-single-use-plastic-items>
- [2] All Party Parliamentary Group on Microplastics: microplastic policies for the government 2021: https://www.thewi.org.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0003/550038/WI_APPGMicroplastics_Report.pdf
- [3] Wildlife & Countryside LINK policy briefing: plastic packaging tax, April 2021: https://www.wcl.org.uk/docs/assets/uploads/Plastic_Packaging_Tax_Link_policy_briefing.pdf
- [4] DEFRA Call for evidence on commonly littered and problematic plastic items: <https://consult.defra.gov.uk/environmental-quality/call-for-evidence-on-commonly-littered-and-problem/>

Friends of the Earth is the UK's largest grassroots environmental campaigning organisation. We were founded in 1971 and have 500,000 active supporters and 360 local groups. Our campaigning has ranged from leading the 'Big Ask' campaign which resulted in the 2008 Climate Change Act, to securing a moratorium on fracking in 2019. Friends of the Earth is a partner in Friends of the Earth International – a network with groups in 75 countries and combined membership of 2 million.