

CEN briefing: Plastic pollution and recycling

Single-use plastic

- **A commitment to prevent all avoidable plastic waste by the end of 2042 has seen the government regularly ban nuisance single-use plastic items.** It has banned microbeads in rinse-off personal care products, and restricted the supply of single-use plastic straws, stirrers and cotton buds. In 2023, the government added single-use plastic cutlery and plates to this list. A repeated commitment to ban plastic wet wipes has been made and the necessary legislation was due to be laid this summer.
- **The government introduced a single-use plastic carrier bag charge in 2015.** Initially 5p and then increasing to 10p in 2021, the tax on plastic carrier bags has led to a 95% cut in single-use plastic bag sales in major supermarkets since 2015. However, it is unclear the extent to which single-use bag consumption has been replaced by the use of low-cost reusable plastic bags for life.
- **Internationally, the UK has been proactive in negotiating for a UN Global Plastic Treaty.** The UK [co-signed](#) the initial proposal to create a treaty which tackles plastic pollution using a lifecycle approach and is a member of the associated high ambition coalition. The final round of negotiations is set to take place at the end of 2024.

The recycling system

- **In 2022, the government introduced a world-leading [plastic packaging tax](#).** In an effort to encourage greater use of recycled plastic, this tax is for packaging which does not meet a minimum threshold of at least 30% recycled content.
- **The [packaging extended producer responsibility scheme \(pEPR\)](#) will incentivise the use of recyclable packaging.** pEPR will subject packaging producers to different fees based on the recyclability of their packaging, with less recyclable packaging paying a higher fee. The cost of managing waste will move from the council taxpayer to packaging producers. The scheme is expected to come into full effect in 2025. The pEPR reforms also include a labelling requirement for packaging where clear and factual information (Recycle/Do Not Recycle) must be displayed.
- **A deposit return scheme (DRS) for drinks containers will be rolled out in 2027.** DRS will require consumers to pay a small deposit (~20p) for drinks containers which they can reclaim if they return it to a reverse vending machine. This popular scheme is in place around the world, providing a financial incentive not to litter this common item.
- **The recycling system will be standardised across England.** [Local recycling rates](#) vary from 18.7% to 64.1% across England, with a national average of 43%. To reduce confusion and to boost rates of recycling, the type of materials that councils must collect will be standardised across England, including a weekly food waste collection. As per the Prime Minister's speech last year, this will not include a requirement for separate bins for each of these materials.
- **A legally-binding target to halve levels of residual waste per person by 2042 has been set.** Residual waste is all the waste that cannot be recycled or reused and must go to landfill, incineration, or an energy from waste facility.