

We have a plastic problem – it's rubbish

We are breathing plastic, drinking plastic, eating plastic, wearing plastic. Plastic is everywhere. Everyone's actions have an impact on the plastic pollutants leaching into our environment and finding their way into our marine environment and us.

An estimated [eight million tonnes](#) of plastic rubbish enters the ocean every year and once there it washes into all oceans and has been found in both the Arctic and Antarctic. As plastics breakdown into microplastics, pieces smaller than a little finger nail, they are ingested by marine life causing harm all the way up through the food chain.

The plastic mess we are in

The way the UK manages plastic waste is complex, and recently things have changed. We currently recycle 38% of our plastic packaging (842,000 tonnes) and until January 2018 sent about 400,000 tonnes to China for further processing. However, [China](#) has banned the import of waste, which they say is due to “large amounts of dirty, even hazardous waste mixed in the solid waste...causing serious harm to their environment.”

We have relied on sending waste plastics to China, out of sight out of mind - it is more profitable to sell to Asia with their more relaxed import controls. However, the recent ban means that the UK must rethink our approach to the production and disposal of plastic waste. It appears doubtful that we will easily find markets that will accept the same low-

quality plastic waste. Which will, in turn drive a need for change in the UK, comprising better sorting processes, more resources and other disposal options for poor quality waste being explored, including increased incineration capacity to avoid landfilling plastic.

What's being done?

There is currently no legislative framework to deal with the issue, however, the government has recently published its environmental plan, [A Green Future](#), which commits to stop all avoidable plastic by 2042 and significantly reduce marine plastic pollution. The plan also mentions levies and packaging-free aisles in supermarkets. The commitment has been welcomed but there is criticism for it being too slow and vague and there are calls for a short-term plan to kick-start the phasing out of all avoidable plastics.

The European Union has gone further, proposing a plastic strategy which recommends a more circular economy; it has set a target to make all plastic packaging recyclable by 2030 coupled with an allocation of €100 (£89m) to finance innovation in this area, to ease the slow return on investment burden, thereby helping to incentivise industry change.

Plastics were also a key discussion point at the World Economic Forum meeting of governments and industry leaders in Davos in January where the [Ellen MacArthur Foundation](#) Circular Design Challenge awarded \$1m for innovative solutions to stop plastics becoming waste. Also, many industry giants pledged to make changes to plastic usage including [Coca-Cola's](#) commitment to recycle a bottle for every bottle they produce. These actions acknowledge that plastic pollution is a problem not just in the UK but globally.

The future for plastic

Plastic is a vital, clever and essential material BUT we must think about reusing, reducing and eliminating single use plastic wherever possible.

Plastics have enabled huge advances in medical, engineering, especially electronic, and construction development. Plastic assists carbon footprint reduction as it is an amazing insulator, reducing heat loss and making lightweight automobile and aircraft parts and components. Plastic also provides many sustainability benefits such as preserving food, helping us to avoid food waste. In Europe, the plastic industry employs 1.5 million people and had a turnover of £300 billion in 2015.

However, how we make, use and dispose of single-use plastics today is unsustainable and having a detrimental effect on our marine environment. Reconsidering how we use and treat plastics at every stage of the life cycle, to curb our consumption and mitigate plastic pollution in the environment, is essential. This requires a cross-sector approach including governments, businesses and consumers. Innovation will be a key driver of success with some of the current ideas including the following:

What should your business do?

Businesses in the UK are starting to review how they use plastics to stay ahead of the curve before stricter legal requirements are announced and further taxes and fees are introduced. As a business, you should be

reviewing the following four key areas to understand and mitigate your plastic footprint:

Products or packaging review: if you produce or sell plastic goods, or add plastic to protect and depatch your company should carry out a full lifecycle plastic footprint review. Understanding the impacts of the product and packaging and exploring ways to reduced or eliminate them.

Review your in house operations: identify and review any single-use plastics your business purchases and understand how they can be avoided or reduced.

Review your supply chain: To get goods to you, single-use plastics will be used and entering your sites. Engage with your suppliers to understand how this can be avoided or minimised.

Set your Plastic Clever goals: To start your single use plastic reduction journey and plan towards eliminating single-use plastic. If your business is considering setting out on this journey and is looking for help to start, my work with Alternative Strategies for Plastic can assist.

The journey is likely to take several years. Once you understand what your Plastic Clever goal is a road map for change can commence.