

Evidence for
Sustainability & Transport Overview & Scrutiny Committee
“Working to make Birmingham a Plastic Free City”
Submission by Birmingham Friends of the Earth, February 2019

Birmingham Friends of the Earth (BFoE) is an independent, non-party campaigning organisation which has been sustained by its members for over 40 years. BFoE is one of many groups nationally and internationally, all advocating the protection of the Earth, which the well-being of this generation and of future generations depends upon.

Understanding the main source of the problem - what is the biggest source of single-use plastics?

Food and drinks packaging is probably the main source of single-use plastics, since people buy these items every day. It is a major component of household waste and or litter and is hence of concern to Birmingham City Council. Plastic bottles and food containers remain in the environment unless someone picks them up and they are likely to wash into rivers and eventually the sea. They take around 450 years to biodegrade. They break down into microfibers that get into the food chain and are then ultimately eaten by people.

A driving force behind the high demand for single-use plastic is the cultural problem of fast food for which there are a great many outlets in the city. Such food is often unhealthy and the containers and wrappings present a huge waste management problem that businesses are currently not paying to manage adequately.

It would be easier to regulate the supply side of the fast food industry rather than changing consumer behaviour in order to reduce and prevent the use of

plastic packaging by offering alternatives such as a cardboard boxes or greaseproof paper.

Identify the scale of the problem in Birmingham - what percentage of plastic is for single-usage and what percentage is collected for recycling and the most common causes of plastic waste in Birmingham.

Birmingham City Council has one of the lowest recycling rates in the country with just 21% of household waste being composted and recycled. Most is residual waste and has to be paid to dispose of in the monopoly contract with Veolia.

Analysis of the composition of residual waste at Tyseley plant has shown that X by weight is plastic, but plastic being light, the volume will be much higher. Birmingham's low recycling rate is a cause for concern as most of the materials which could be recycled at the kirbide are ending up in the incinerator or in landfill.

Another contributor to Birmingham's low household recycling rate is the lack of recycling facilities in many flats and apartment blocks. If recycling facilities were improved for all residential properties then recycling rates would increase dramatically.

A concern alongside the low household recycling rate is the high number of single-use plastics which are being disposed of through takeaways and restaurants which are not being recycled.

Examine what has worked/not worked to tackle the problem.

Birmingham no longer gives out millions of bin bags to householders but distributes reusable bins.

Birmingham's current collection scheme is not working. This is demonstrated by 79% of household refuse being either incinerated or sent to landfill. Both of these disposal methods cost Birmingham money.

Residents do not understand what they should put in the recycling bin or what happens to it and have often given up trying to comply. The 'Zero Heroes' campaign is not specific enough and its name suggests that you have to be a hero to recycle in Birmingham.

In the past, Birmingham City Council trialled an incentive scheme using nectar points. This proved successful, but it was later dropped. A similar incentive scheme would help incentivise recycling.

Birmingham City Council through its purchasing power could eliminate single-use packaging. For example, through policies such as a ban on black plastic which mechanical recycling separation cannot recognise.

The decline of plastic waste for the above reasons will very much impact the calorific value of rubbish burned at Tyseley, which mostly comes from the plastic items, and will bring forward the day when it will close. Much of the residual waste in Birmingham is food waste, for which we have submitted a petition calling for separate collection.

Identify best practice examples from elsewhere and what can we learn from them and also examples of good practice already happening in Birmingham.

There are some examples of good practice in Birmingham. Good practice is demonstrated by The Clean Kilo¹, a zero waste supermarket in Birmingham. Instead of buying food stuffs and cleaning products in single-use packaging, the supermarket packages items in reusable containers or the customer can bring along their own containers. This has proved a popular and sustainable business, showing that much plastic is unnecessary.

Birmingham University successfully encouraged use of reusable coffee cups.

¹ Clean Kilo <https://www.thecleankilo.co.uk>

Wetherspoons has switched to paper straws, no condiment sachets etc, while cutting out disposable coffee cups. Some retailers, such as Boston Tea Party, also don't use disposable coffee cups.

Plymouth's Waterfront District has been awarded Plastic Free Communities status². Plymouth council has committed to implementing a ban on single-use plastics by 2020 and by September 2019, all Council buildings will go single-use plastic free. Furthermore, an Environmental Assessment will be required by event holders for events that take place on Council owned land showing how single-use plastics will be eliminated or reduced.

Stroud District council has been asked to advise the government due to its high and impressively accelerated recycling rate. Birmingham could learn from their collection system.

We welcome any move for Birmingham City Council to adopt plastic minimisation in their procurement strategy. Birmingham City Council could implement a ban on single-use plastics in all council run/owned facilities and put into place policies to ensure businesses undertake an environmental assessment as part of granting a business licence.

The Commonwealth Games 2022 provides an ideal opportunity for Birmingham City Council to be a leading authority in tackling the use of single-use plastic. The City Council could make use of the planning and procurement phases to ensure the Commonwealth Games is plastic free. The last Games in Australia had exemplary policies about waste, which should be followed in Birmingham's case³.

Identify on-going or emerging Government consultations/strategies

²Plymouth <https://www.plymouth.gov.uk/environmentandpollution/plastics>

³Gold Coast <https://gc2018.com/about/sustainability>

and understand the future implications for the amount of plastic going into the waste stream e.g. consultation on eliminating single-use plastics, consultation on deposit scheme for plastic bottles and anticipated upcoming new national waste strategy.

Almost all plastic drinks bottles can be recycled. In the UK less than 50% of plastic bottles are recycled and only 7% of those are actually turned into new bottles.

During 2018, Birmingham Friends of the Earth ran a 'Don't Lose Your Bottle' campaign, with a petition sent to the Secretary of State for the Environment, calling for the introduction of a national Deposit Return Scheme on plastic bottles in England. The petition gained support from a high number of Birmingham residents, along with Councillors and MPs, and a UK-wide scheme is to be introduced⁴. A survey of deposit schemes across Europe has found they generally recover 80-90% of bottles and cans for recycling⁵.

A pilot by Iceland the supermarket in Wolverhampton has been a big success refunding 10p per bottle via reverse vending machines⁶.

Deposit return will have a big impact on waste, litter and recycling with very real savings to local authorities⁷ from which BCC should be planning to benefit.

The introduction of the 5p charge on plastic carrier bags has dramatically reduced the number of single-use bags by an estimated 15 billion since 2015. The success of the scheme has led to the government consulting on the possibility of increasing the charge to 10p and will extend this to all shops⁸.

⁴Deposit Return <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/deposit-return-scheme-in-fight-against-plastic>

⁵http://www.acrplus.org/images/technical-reports/2019_ACR_Deposit-refund_systems_in_Europe_Report.pdf

⁶Iceland <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2019/jan/02/plastic-bottle-deposit-scheme-in-uk-proving-a-hit-with-shoppers>

⁷Benefits

https://www.keepbritaintidy.org/sites/default/files/resources/KBT_Research_Report_Deposit_Refund_System_2017.pdf

⁸Carrier bags <https://consult.defra.gov.uk/environmental-quality/extending-the-single-use-bags-charge/>

The Plastic PACT, a Wrap initiative, has brought together manufacturers, retailers, the UK Government and NGOs to tackle plastic waste and create a circular economy. The Plastic PACT aims to eliminate single-use packaging by 2025.

DEFRA's "Resources and Waste Strategy for England" strongly encourages separate food waste collection for use in anaerobic digestion⁹. This is the other side of food purchasing. We have submitted a petition calling for a food waste collection service in Birmingham like that in neighbouring Sandwell. All households in Wales have a separate food waste collection as part of the Zero Waste Wales strategy¹⁰. In Birmingham's household collection, nearly half of the waste in weight is food waste. Some commercial AD plants now accept food waste for free (at zero gate fees).

The City Council should be modelling the waste stream in Birmingham going forward as plastic declines and food waste is diverted. This decline will have an impact on the combustibility of waste in the Tyseley Incinerator. This means a date for the closure of the incinerator should be added to the council's waste strategy.

Explore the most effective/efficient waste management system to separate, collect and recycle plastics to increase recycling rates.

Some recycling systems put all plastic in bags, separated from other recycling. When there is a separate food waste collection in place, dry and non-smelling residual waste needs collection less frequently. The BFoE petition has asked BCC for this and many areas already do it, including Sandwell.

We also ask if there could be another pod in the current recycling bin that would allow us to separate the plastics.

More could be done in schools to indirectly change parental behaviour. BFoE have run a number of sessions in schools and these have been successful. Solihull is particularly good at environmental education.

⁹DEFRA strategy <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/resources-and-waste-strategy-for-england>

¹⁰Wales https://gov.wales/topics/environmentcountryside/epq/waste_recycling/zerowaste/?lang=en

Explore possible incentives which encourage consumers to both avoid/prevent the use of plastic and to encourage higher levels of recycling for example by providing economic incentive for consumers to recycle plastic.

When residents pay council tax and get a weekly collection of rubbish free, there is no reward for recycling. In many countries, you pay for your rubbish but can recycle for free, for example in Ireland.

Of course, a deposit return on bottles would also work to boost recycling.

Explore the potential viable alternatives to the use of single use plastics and how can these be promoted widely.

Cardboard packaging for fast food can be single-use but biodegradable, and this would be a much better alternative to plastic.

What happens to the single use plastics could be far better communicated, as we find that many people are unaware of what happens after these plastics go into the bin.

Water refill stations around the city centre could be better advertised, and we know that Eco Birmingham are working hard on this. The Council could replace drinks vending machines on council property with water fountains, encouraging the use of reusable drinking containers. The council could then explore rewards and incentives for people who refill. Rewards could include money off swimming etc. They could also work with Severn Trent to promote the quality of Birmingham's water.

The Council could have a Directory outline for businesses to identify alternatives to plastic.

Explore ways of raising consumer awareness and reducing consumer confusion by clearer public communication and consumer messaging about plastic and about best-practice on recycling.

There could be much better information about what can and can't be recycled, and where things go. The current system can be confusing, leaving many people unsure what to do. Information could be circulated via an app, an

online video, instruction stickers on bins, posters on lamp posts. Likewise, recycling rules could be advertised on public transport. Recycling guides could also be included with any council correspondence, for example council tax bills.

Explore what can be done to reduce waste from single-use plastics from a regulatory enforcement standpoint.

First and foremost, the council could find out what other local authorities are doing, as many local authorities are already making great progress.

The council could consider making it a term on tenancy for businesses who already have to show waste disposal contracts, and this could be a good way of influencing takeaway restaurants. With better enforcement and increased fines, enforcement pays for itself. This could also include regulation of market stall holders who might be asked to use paper instead of plastic bags.

After banning single use plastics in council buildings, regular independent audits could be conducted. The council could then make these audits public to demonstrate best practice and set a good example for businesses and organisations across the city.

The 14 measures identified in the Council resolution to reduce plastic should all be acted upon. If any of them cannot be acted upon, they should give clear reasons as to why this hasn't been possible.

The findings of this Scrutiny committee on plastic waste should be added to the Council Waste Strategy.