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Spring Statement 2018—tackling the plastic problem

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Environmental analysis: Christopher Badger, barrister at 6 Pump Court, considers the government's recent call for evidence on using the tax system or charges to tackle single-use plastic waste.

Original news

Spring Statement 2018: 'Necessary' consultation on tax changes to reduce plastic waste announced, [LNB News 13/03/2018 78](#)

The government has announced a consultation which will explore how changes to the tax system or charges could be used to decrease the amount of single-use plastics the UK wastes by reducing unnecessary production, increasing reuse, and improving recycling. The consultation closes on 18 May 2018..

Why is plastic waste such a problem and what is the background leading up to this call for evidence?

The UK produces millions of tonnes of single-use plastic waste a year, ranging from coffee cups to takeaway boxes. Much of this waste does not get recycled but instead is sent to landfill or is incinerated. In particular, the impact of plastic waste on the marine environment has featured heavily in the news recently. The government's 25-year environment plan has targeted the issue of single-use plastic waste and has pledged to eradicate all avoidable plastic waste by the end of 2042. The government is also due to publish a resources and waste strategy later this year.

The call for evidence is part of a drive to see how economic 'incentives' can be used to encourage more sustainable behaviour and drive technological progress, which in turn is intended to create new jobs and prosperity.

What information is being sought about the definition of single-use plastics and how their benefits and harms could be assessed?

Single-use plastics are defined in the call for evidence as including 'all products that are made wholly or partly of plastic and are typically intended to be used just once and/or for a short period of time before being disposed of'. The government is asking whether this definition should be used, and wants to understand more how to define single-use plastics—in particular what items should be included and excluded.

There are enormous benefits to plastics. They protect goods from damage and can extend the shelf life of food. They can reduce the weight of aeroplanes and vehicles and have key uses in the medical field. But when littered, plastics can last centuries in the natural environment, posing a risk to wildlife and nature. The majority of UK marine plastic ends up in the Arctic.

The government wants to know what polymer types and items of plastic are particularly problematic, and whether there are more environmentally-friendly alternatives that can still offer similar benefits.

There are various points in the life cycle at which the government could intervene—production, retail, consumption and discarding. What further information is the government seeking before it formulates its approach?

The government wants a better understanding of the drivers behind the various points in the lifecycle, and what interventions could be brought in to affect behaviour and to gain an idea of what kind of effect such intervention would have.

Among other things, data is sought on the production of plastic, including what proportion of recycled plastic is used, the extent to which the decisions of producers and consumers influence the plastics used in retail and what factors influence consumers' choices related to single-use plastic items.

What possible tax systems and charges might the government consider?

The government wants to look at the possible incentives that could be introduced to change behaviour and deliver a better environmental outcome. The recent introduction of the single-use plastic carrier bag charge has demonstrated that even small economic change can change both consumer and retailer behaviour to encourage reuse and reduction of waste to the tune of around nine billion bags a year. I anticipate that the government will closely examine a system of financial levies on those that place products and packaging on the UK market, as well as potentially examining financial incentives on supermarkets and food giants to influence consumer behaviour and choices.

The main economic incentives referred to in the call for evidence include producer responsibility, landfill tax and the carrier bag charge.

The call for evidence refers to economic incentives encouraging development of new technology or growth in the recycling industry. What might the opportunities be in this field? What other impacts could result?

Twenty million pounds is to be diverted from existing departmental budgets to businesses and universities to stimulate new thinking and rapid solutions to the problem of plastic waste. China's recent ban on imports of plastics for recycling has increased the scale of the challenge.

Innovative and effective solutions are required. In particular, real progress in the recycling industry has the potential to significantly relieve local authorities of the recycling pressures that are currently felt and massively reduce the amount of waste sent to landfill.

What are the next steps and likely timescales?

The deadline for responses is 18 May 2018. The government will set out its intentions once it has considered the responses received.

Interviewed by Alex Heshmaty.

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