



Wise in 5: Single-use plastics

Wise in 5 is a snapshot comparative guide to a public policy issue across the nations of the UK and Ireland. It helps you be PolicyWISE (Wales, Ireland, Scotland, England) in 5 (it takes just five minutes to read).

It includes a summary of the latest policy developments across the nations, as well as related research from PolicyWISE, The Open University and PolicyWISE's university partners.

PolicyWISE creates neutral and constructive spaces for policy professionals and academics across the nations to develop relationships, respect and knowledge. We support and nurture a common culture of developing and sharing insight, knowledge, ideas and context from across the nations in a comparative and collaborative way.



	Ban single-use plastic cutlery, plates, straws and stirrers	Ban polystyrene lids for drinks/food	Deposit Return Scheme
Northern Ireland	Since 2022		
Scotland	Since Aug 2022		
Republic of Ireland			In effect from Feb 2024
England	From Oct 2023		
Wales	From Oct 2023	From 2024	
Key	In effect - Yes	Proposed	No

Wise in 5: Single-use plastics

Overview

According to the [UN Environment Programme](#), around the world half of all plastic produced is designed for single-use purposes, used just once, and then thrown away. Plastic pollution takes hundreds of years to break down and inflicts serious damage to our oceans, rivers and land. It is also a major source of greenhouse gas emissions, from the production and manufacture of the plastic itself, to the way it is disposed.

The [European Union](#) brought in measures in 2021 meaning that single-use plastic plates, cutlery, straws, balloon sticks and cotton buds cannot be placed on the markets of the EU Member States. This also applies to cups, food and beverage containers made of expanded polystyrene, and all products made of oxo-degradable plastic.

Scotland banned many single-use plastics in June 2022, and England and Wales both have legislation coming into force from October 2023. There are exemptions such as plastic soft-drinks bottles. It also does not include food or drink in polystyrene containers if it needs further preparation before it is consumed. Most countries also have exceptions for straws for medical needs or in care settings.

The Northern Ireland Protocol requires the supply of single-use plastic plates, cutlery, balloon sticks, drink stirrers, cotton bud sticks, and expanded polystyrene food and drinks containers, including cups to be banned.



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Nation by Nation

Scotland

Scotland became the first part of the UK to implement a ban on many single-use plastics, with [legislation](#) in force from June 2022. The ban made it an offence for businesses in Scotland to manufacture and supply many single-use plastic items, including plastic cutlery, plates and stirrers.

However, when the ban started, the regulations under the [UK Internal Market Act](#) meant the ban only applied to single-use plastic items manufactured or imported into Scotland from outside the UK. The Scottish Government had to seek an exclusion to implement the ban on single-use plastics ahead of the rest of the UK.

It's almost a year since Scotland became the first country in the UK to impose a £5,000 fine for those who flout the ban but no takeaways have been fined since Scotland made single-use plastics illegal.

The Scottish Government has previously consulted on the introduction of charges for the provision of items, such as single-use disposable items, that are harmful to the environment. They are establishing a working group to support the design of a charge for single-use beverage cups, including arrangements for monitoring effectiveness.

England

According to the [Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs](#), England alone uses 2.7 billion items of single-use cutlery – most of which are plastic – and 721 million single-use plates per year, but only 10% are recycled. If 2.7 billion pieces of cutlery were lined up, they would go round the world over eight and a half times (based on a 15cm piece of cutlery).

From 1 October 2023, businesses must no longer supply, sell or offer certain single-use plastic items in [England](#). The ban on these items will include: online and over-the-counter sales and supply, items from new and existing stock, all types of single-use plastic, including biodegradable, compostable and recycled.

This includes a complete ban on the supply of single-use plastic cutlery or balloon sticks with no exemptions to this ban, including ready-to-consume food and drink in polystyrene containers and cups.

However, there are exemptions that mean the ban on the supply of single-use plastic plates, trays and bowls to members of the public does not include supplying to another business or if the item is pre-filled or filled at the point of sale (for example, a pre-filled salad bowl or ready meal packaged in a tray, a plate filled at the counter of a takeaway or a tray used to deliver food).

Local authorities will carry out inspections to make sure the rules are being followed and requests to see records and complaints about a business breaking the law can be made to Trading Standards.

Wales

Following a [consultation](#) in 2020, the Environmental Protection (Single-use Plastic Products) (Wales) Bill was introduced in September 2022 and passed by the Senedd. The legislation has two stages mapped out with dates attached.

[The Environmental Protection \(Single-use Plastic Products\) \(Wales\) Act](#) will make it a criminal offence to supply or offer to supply (including for free) specific single-use plastic products to consumers in Wales.

Phase 1 – from October 2023:

- Plates – this includes paper plates with a laminated plastic surface
- Cutlery – for example, forks, spoons, knives
- Drinks stirrers – those designed for stirring drinks or liquid food
- Cups made of expanded or foamed extruded polystyrene
- Takeaway food containers made of expanded or foamed extruded polystyrene
- Sticks for balloons
- Plastic-stemmed cotton buds
- Drinking straws – with exemptions so people who need them to eat and drink safely and independently can continue to have them.

Phase 2 – will begin to come into force from 2024 onwards:

Plastic single-use carrier bags

- Polystyrene lids for cups and takeaway food containers
- Oxo-degradable plastic products.

Enforcement of these new measures is with local authorities. This builds on previous measures that Wales has taken in the past, such as the charge on single-use carrier bags which was introduced in 2011.

There is a list of items banned through the Act, but they are not included in the list of [agreed exclusions](#) to the [UK Internal Market Act 2020](#) 'market access principles'. This means that as these items are permitted in other parts of the UK, they can [continue to be supplied in Wales](#) as long as they are produced in, or imported into, other parts of the UK.

Northern Ireland

[Consultation for the Reduction of Single-Use Plastic Beverage Cups and Food Containers](#), closed 14 Jan 2022.

[Deposit Return Scheme for drinks containers](#)

Consultation response details indicate that, through a small cash deposit placed on single-use drinks containers, a new scheme covering England, Wales and Northern Ireland is set to be introduced in 2025. It aims to ensure that after three years of its launch, 85% fewer drinks containers are discarded as litter. Scottish Ministers attempted to introduce a Deposit Return Scheme, but the UK Internal Market Act 2020 excludes any of the listed items which were first imported or produced in another part of the UK.

Republic Of Ireland

The European parliament voted to ban single-use plastic cutlery, cotton buds, straws and stirrers as part of a sweeping law against plastic waste that despoils beaches and pollutes oceans. This was transposed into [Irish Law](#) in July 2021. The EU have since written to Ireland asking for more evidence of the steps the Irish Parliament is taking to combat this.

The vote by MEPs paved the way for a ban on single-use plastics to come into force by 2021 in all EU member states.



Wise up – 5 policy points to takeaway

1. Policymakers should ensure the evaluation of the regulations and encourage learning between the inspection regimes (predominately at local-authority level).
2. Governments should invest in positive messaging, encouraging the wider UK and Ireland population to support the move away from the use of single-use plastics.
3. Governments should work in partnership with manufacturers to ensure the move away from single-use plastics is clear and avoids confusion.
4. Research institutions have an important role to play in behavioural changes as well as scientific progress in finding new materials which cause less environmental damage.
5. Policymakers should ensure that the rollout of the single Deposit Return Scheme for drinks containers is not delayed, seeking to proactively find compromises when challenges are identified.



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Wise in 5

The only regular snapshot comparative guide to public policy issues across the nations of the UK and Ireland.

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