

Press release: UK Government rallies Commonwealth to unite on marine waste

Updated: Updated version

The Government has announced its intention to ban the sale of plastic straws, drink stirrers and plastic-stemmed cotton buds at the start of the Commonwealth Heads of Government Summit.

The Prime Minister will also call on all other Commonwealth countries to join in the fight against plastic pollution.

Subject to the consultation, which the Environment Secretary will launch later this year, the Government will ban the sale of these items in England under plans to protect our rivers and seas and meet our 25 Year Environment Plan ambition to eliminate avoidable plastic waste. This forms part of the wider government waste strategy – including the government’s current call for evidence on how we can use the tax system to address single use plastics waste.

In order to eliminate these items from use the Government will work with industry to develop alternatives and ensure there is sufficient time to adapt. It will also propose excluding plastic straws for medical reasons.

Single-use plastic items such as straws, stirrers and plastic-stemmed cotton buds have a significant impact on our environment, both on land and in our seas and rivers when they are either littered or discarded incorrectly after use – with a recent study showing 8.5 billion plastic straws are thrown away each year in the UK.

The announcement comes as the Prime Minister has urged all Commonwealth countries to sign-up to the newly-formed Commonwealth Clean Oceans Alliance and take action, be this by a ban microbeads, a commitment to cutting down on single use plastic bags, or other steps to eliminate avoidable plastic waste.

To drive this forward the UK government has committed a £61.4 million package of funding to boost global research and help countries across the Commonwealth stop plastic waste from entering the oceans in the first place.

Prime Minister Theresa May said:

Plastic waste is one of the greatest environmental challenges facing the world, which is why protecting the marine environment is central to our agenda at the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting.

The UK government is a world leader on this issue, and the British public have shown passion and energy embracing our plastic bag

charge and microbead ban, and today we have put forward ambitious plans to further reduce plastic waste from straws, stirrers and cotton buds.

Alongside our domestic action, this week we are rallying Commonwealth countries to join us in the fight against marine plastics, with £61.4million funding for global research and to improve waste management in developing countries.

The Commonwealth is a unique organisation, with a huge diversity of wildlife, environments and coastlines. Together we can effect real change so that future generations can enjoy a natural environment that is healthier than we currently find it.

Environment Secretary Michael Gove said:

Single-use plastics are a scourge on our seas and lethal to our precious environment and wildlife so it is vital we act now. We have already banned harmful microbeads and cut plastic bag use, and now we want to take action on straws, stirrers and cotton buds to help protect our marine life.

We've already seen a number of retailers, bars and restaurants stepping up to the plate and cutting plastic use, however it's only through government, businesses and the public working together that we will protect our environment for the next generation – we all have a role to play in turning the tide on plastic.

There are over 150 million tonnes of plastic in the world's oceans and every year one million birds and over 100,000 sea mammals die from eating and getting tangled in plastic waste.

Today's announcement is the latest move in the government crackdown on plastic, following the plastic microbeads ban hailed as one of the world's strongest bans, the 5p plastic bag charge – which has led to 9 billion fewer bags distributed, and last month's pledge to introduce a deposit return scheme, or DRS, for single use drinks containers, including bottles and cans. It sits alongside the 25 Year Environment Plan commitment to eliminate avoidable plastic waste. The Treasury has also launched a call for evidence on how charges and changes to the tax system could be used to reduce single use plastics.