

No more clutching at straws - the policy journey to phasing out single use plastic in the UK

Blog post by Research Associate Mollie Brennan, 5 October 2018

At the governing UK Conservative party's conference this week, parliamentary undersecretary of state, Therese Coffey, promised a 'radical' Waste and Resources Strategy by the end of 2018. A series of government enquiries this year have underscored widespread support for more hard-nosed policies. The EU's circular economy package recycling targets and China's hardening line on waste imports are also pressuring policymakers to move. So, what should businesses expect?

One thing is almost certainly more taxes. The UK government has previously erred on the side of caution in implementing taxes and levies. That seems to be changing. Public support for 'point of sale' taxes following on from the 2015 plastic bag levy, have made the introduction of a latte levy and hike in the plastic bag tax more likely. A broader set of plastic taxes is also particularly appealing as a short-term revenue raiser and probably a counter-intuitive and attractively striking move for the Conservative government. There are indications that officials are focusing on manufacturers - including increasing taxes on virgin materials, specific to single use or hard to recycle plastics. They are also looking at tax breaks for using recycled content.

Reform of the UK's Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) system is also on the cards. Reform in the package is likely to include producers footing a greater cost for recovery (local authorities currently end up covering 90% of costs, and they are struggling) and emphasis on those funds being directed into domestic reprocessing.

What should UK companies make of this? There is a strong case that they should support reform of the EPR system in particular. It gets to the root of issues in the current system, and while it will mean higher costs, these should come with a greater voice and visibility in recycling policy. The more effective and efficient the EPR, the stronger the case will be for minimising the use for blanket bans or taxes on specific items. Taxes send a political message, but they are patchy as drivers of change and often fail to direct funds into domestic recycling infrastructure. In the first year the plastic bag tax was introduced, funds raised through major retailers were largely channelled into Alzheimer's research.

One way or another, the UK's relationship with single use plastic looks to be coming to an end. The transition to a market that only allows easily recycled products, is supported by efficient sorting and reprocessing facilities, and drives demand for recycled material will not be simple, politically or practically. How radical the UK government will end up being remains to be seen, but change is coming.