

BRITA UK comments

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Over the course of the last few years, BRITA UK, which provides consumers with practical alternatives to single-use plastic bottles, has sought to boost awareness and understanding of the impact of disposable plastics on the environment and, equally, to look at solutions to this challenge.

We work with a number of third sector organisations on the important issue of reducing single-use plastic waste, and, in particular, minimising the use of disposable plastic water bottles, which cause significant damage to the marine environment and are a key cause of litter in the Thames and around London. These partners include Marine Conservation Society, Whale and Dolphin Conservation, Refill, and Keep Britain Tidy.

There is no question that action is needed to tackle this issue and we welcome the Mayor's commitment to promote the installation of water fountains across the capital. However, to achieve effective and long-term change there is also a need to examine Londoners' willingness to purchase single-use plastic bottles even while aware of their impact, and to address the apparent reluctance to seek out tap water refills. This includes looking at the obstacles to refilling and the reasons why people are not making use of existing resources.

Last year, BRITA UK partnered with Keep Britain Tidy's Centre for Social Innovation to conduct a study^[1] into attitudes around opting for tap water refills and carrying a reusable bottle over purchasing a single-use plastic water bottle. The research, conducted by YouGov, found that two thirds (67%) of Londoners felt uncomfortable asking for a glass of tap water when out and about, even though licensed premises are legally required to provide free drinking water on request. A third (35%) said they felt awkward asking for a water refill in a reusable bottle even if they were making a purchase.

Notably, more than three in five (61%) Londoners said they would be more likely to use a reusable water bottle if tap water refills were more freely available in places such as shops, airports and parks. In fact, two thirds (64%) chose not to buy bottled water if tap water was available. Meanwhile, 73% of Londoners said they would like there to be greater availability of free tap water, but only 36% said they were willing to go the extra mile to find alternatives to plastic bottles.

The research also determined that:

- Fewer than three in ten Londoners (28%) know their rights when it comes to asking for a glass of tap water or filling a reusable water bottle in public buildings and businesses.
- 59% believe businesses that serve food and/or drinks should be required to provide free drinking water to the public, regardless of whether they are a customer or not.
- 49% worry about the cleanliness of public water taps and fountains.
- More than half (53%) rarely or never carry a reusable bottle when out during the day.

It is clear that in London and around the UK it can be challenging to find somewhere to fill up a reusable bottle for free or to get a glass of water. In addition to this, many consumers buy bottled water out of preference around taste. Unfortunately, too often that means buying another plastic bottle that will then be thrown away.

Importantly, however, the research found that only 11% of Londoners usually drink from water fountains or public taps when not at home. The installation of a comprehensive network of water fountains will go some way to addressing the availability of tap water across London but attitudes towards using these must shift. Another part of this could come from improving the options available to Londoners who prefer the taste and quality of bottled water, for example by cafes offering complimentary filtered water.

In the meantime, businesses must play their part in cutting down on plastic waste. While some already proactively offer free drinking water and encourage customers or non-customers to fill up a reusable bottle, we need all businesses across London to follow their example, along with promoting greater availability of public drinking fountains and education about the safety and hygiene of these.

City to Sea's Refill app [2] (which seeks to connect thirsty people with cafes, shops and offices willing to offer free tap water refills) has recently partnered with Water UK, to develop an initiative that will see all 15 water companies in England support the expansion of the scheme over the next two years. The scheme has also secured the support of Whitbread, which has pledged to provide free drinking water in each of its 3,000 Costa Coffee and Premier Inn locations from March of this year.

If London can match this ambition, and businesses across the capital can proactively offer free refills to people bringing reusable bottles, this would reduce the incentive for people to purchase single-use plastic bottles of water and enable them to make sustainable choices in their everyday lives.

[1] Understanding provision, usage and perceptions of free drinking water to the public in the UK, Centre for Social Innovation, 11th May 2017 - http://www.keepbritaintidy.org/sites/default/files/resources/KBT_CFSI_BRITA_Water_Water_Everywhere_2017.pdf

[2] www.refill.org.uk