

Deputy Chair of the Environment Committee



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Mayor Sadiq Khan

(Via email)

Dear Sadiq,

Londoners are revolting against the plastic waste plaguing our parks, rivers and oceans. A recent study found that many fish in the river Thames have ingested plastic fibres, as much as 75 per cent of one species.ⁱ Each year, at least 8 million tonnes of plastics leak into the world's oceans—equivalent to the contents of a rubbish truck every minute.ⁱⁱ Campaigns such as the Evening Standard's #Laststraw, which has successfully lobbied Boroughs to encourage businesses to remove plastic straws from food and drink establishments, demonstrate that Londoners are ready for change.

Reducing the use of plastics in London will be key to tackling the disastrously high level of plastic pollution. Most of our plastic waste is generated from packaging which is purchased in a supermarket, meaning change will only happen with their involvement. Fortunately, there have been some steps in the right direction: in our meeting on the issue, the Environment Committee heard that the Co-operative supermarket has reduced its plastic use by 44 per cent since 2006 and many supermarkets have been using recyclable alternatives such as paper and cardboard substitutes.

But less positive is that London has among the lowest recycling rates in the country.ⁱⁱⁱ Manufacturers, retailers and local recycling services all bear some responsibility for failing to enable Londoners to recycle more plastic. As the British Plastic Federation said; "You have to make it easy for people and we do not".

Part of the problem is that confusing and complicated recycling instructions mean residents don't recycle. In a recent survey by the waste and resources charity WRAP, two thirds of households expressed uncertainty about how to correctly dispose of one or more items. Further,

the British Retail Consortium (BRC) identified that poor communication between local authority recycling systems and industry was leading to inconsistent labelling. The BRC developed a recycling labelling template, but the guidance is voluntary and as a result, instructions are still inconsistent. We therefore urge you to speak with DEFRA about making the guidance mandatory.

Further, more needs to be done to involve stakeholders along the product lifecycle. WRAP's Plastic Pact has brought together major manufacturers, retailers and public-sector organisations to address plastic waste and promote a circular economy. During the committee meeting, Viridor told us that the Pact could "make it easier for consumers and make it easier for us as the recyclers". Considering the Pact has been so well received by stakeholders, we recommend that you sign up to the pledge. Signing will not only enhance current strategies but encourage other public and private sector bodies in London to sign up too.

The problem with plastic recycling provision is clear when you consider that two-thirds of our plastic is recycled abroad—previously China accepted 50 per cent of the world's plastics. The recent London Assembly report, *Wasting London's Future*, found that developing London's recycling infrastructure would encourage recycling markets and further funding into recycling infrastructure. It also enables greater transparency and confidence that our plastic waste is being recycled properly.


Finally, we must ensure that any alternatives are more environmentally friendly than those products that they are replacing. Plastic has been useful, especially in preventing food waste and saving carbon. New materials proposed as alternative, such as compostable plastic, should be rigorously and scientifically tested to ensure that they aren't impacting the environment in similar, or different ways, to that of plastic waste. Here the UK could learn from Norway's example: in addition to reducing plastic use in general, manufacturers have transitioned to using only two types of plastic, one of which is very easily recyclable, and consequently the country now recycles 98 per cent of its plastic waste.

As public awareness of the need to cut down on single use plastics grows, it is time to build on the work you have already done with the One Less Bottle campaign and in the Environment Strategy, by tackling the full range of plastics that pollute our parks, rivers and oceans, and bring in the full range of stakeholders that will support this effort.

I would be grateful for your reply to the points raised. Please copy your response to the Committee's Scrutiny Manager, Ian Williamson – Ian.Williamson@london.gov.uk.

Once again, thank you very much for your time.

Yours sincerely,



Annie Cooper

Deputy Chair of the Environment Committee

ⁱ McGoran, A.R., Clark P.F., and Morritt (2016) *Presence of microplastic in the digestive tracts of European flounder, *Platichthys flesus*, and European smelt, *Osmerus eperlanus*, from the River Thames*, Environmental Pollution, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.envpol.2016.09.078>. As well as 75 per cent of flounder, the study found that 20 per cent of smelt had ingested plastic fibres

ⁱⁱ Ellen MacArthur Foundation (2017) *The New Plastics Economy: Rethinking the Future of Plastic*, (available online) https://www.ellenmacarthurfoundation.org/assets/downloads/EllenMacArthurFoundation_TheNewPlasticsEconomy_Pages.pdf [accessed on 12/09/18]

ⁱⁱⁱ https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/664594/LACW_mgt_annual_Stats_Notice_Dec_2017.pdf