



THE  
**PEOPLE**  
VS. **PLASTIC**

# EXPOSING THE UK'S TOP POLLUTERS

The 2025 Brand Audit



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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Powered by citizen science data collected by communities and volunteers across the UK, this report uses irrefutable evidence from our largest dataset yet to expose the true scale of pollution across the nation.

The data shows that plastic remains the most dominant type of pollution in the UK, no matter where you are – and of that, a significant amount originates from single-use packaging.

We reveal the 2025 ‘Dirty Dozen’ – the top 12 polluting household brands, along with their international parent companies – who are driving the UK’s single-use packaging pollution crisis. This time, we dive even deeper into the systemic problems the UK faces with plastic and packaging pollution, unearthing why such little progress has been made – despite decades of promises and a strong public mandate for change.

Our investigations found that the Dirty Dozen have done next to nothing to tackle plastic and packaging pollution. Instead, they worked relentlessly to protect their profits by spinning greenwash lies, abandoning targets, and derailing the desperately needed legislation designed to tackle their pollution, **ALL THE WHILE CONTINUING TO FEED SKYROCKETING PLASTIC PRODUCTION RATES.** At the same time, the UK Government has left them free to pollute without consequence.

Our data exposes the potential impact that policy delays, largely pushed by the biggest polluters, have had on plastic pollution rates in the UK – and the devastating impact on the ocean, wildlife and communities as a result.

Regardless of a decade of promises, pledges and self-set targets to tackle the issue, our data is crystal clear: Polluting brands have done next to nothing to take real action to cut plastic production or switch to new circular models of reuse. Voluntary action to tackle the plastic pollution crisis is not working. We need the UK government to step up and act now.

## What we’re calling for:



# SAS'S BIGGEST CLEAN-UP DATASET YET!



**158,706**  
PEOPLE

Took part in SAS's **MILLION MILE CLEAN** programme during 2025.

They collected a staggering

**72,594KG**  
OF POLLUTION

This audit reports on the data submitted from

**2,549**  
CLEANS

covering **BEACHES, RIVERS, PARKS, MOUNTAINS** and **STREETS.**

**OVER 100,000 POLLUTING ITEMS WERE**

**COLLECTED, COUNTED AND CLASSIFIED**

**JUST 12 HOUSEHOLD BRANDS** were responsible for **OVER HALF** of all branded packaging found.

WE CALL THEM...

**'THE DIRTY DOZEN'**

These brands account for **17,331 PIECES OF PACKAGING POLLUTION** collectively.

Nearly half of all pollution collected in 2025 **COULD HAVE BEEN PREVENTED**, had DRS & pEPR policies been in place.

The Dirty Dozen have played a key role in **DERAILING** or **DELAYING** the policy interventions that would have tackled the most polluting items.

Across the Dirty Dozen, self-set targets have been **UN-MET, DELAYED, DILUTED** or simply **DROPPED ALL TOGETHER.**

**CIGARETTE BUTTS, CRISP & SWEET PACKETS** and **PLASTIC FRAGMENTS** were the top 3 most common items found, accounting for 31% of polluting items.

**PLASTIC** WAS THE MOST PREVALENT TYPE OF POLLUTION FOUND ACROSS THE WHOLE UK.

**SINGLE-USE PLASTIC PACKAGING** accounted for **50% OF PLASTIC ITEMS RECORDED**, an increase on previous years.

PEOPLE POWERED EVIDENCE BASE

# THE BRAND AUDIT

## WHAT IS IT?

The Surfers Against Sewage (SAS) Brand Audit is the output of our Million Mile Clean programme. This incredible citizen science initiative is powered by SAS volunteers who collect, record and report the branded pollution they uncover during a Million Mile Clean.

During 2025, 6,818 volunteers submitted the data from their Million Mile Clean. Collectively, we use this data as evidence to shine a light on the scale of UK pollution, **EXPOSE THE BIGGEST POLLUTERS**, and **HOLD THEM TO ACCOUNT**. This time, we expose both the brands *and* their parent companies responsible for the wave of single-use plastic packaging scouring the UK.

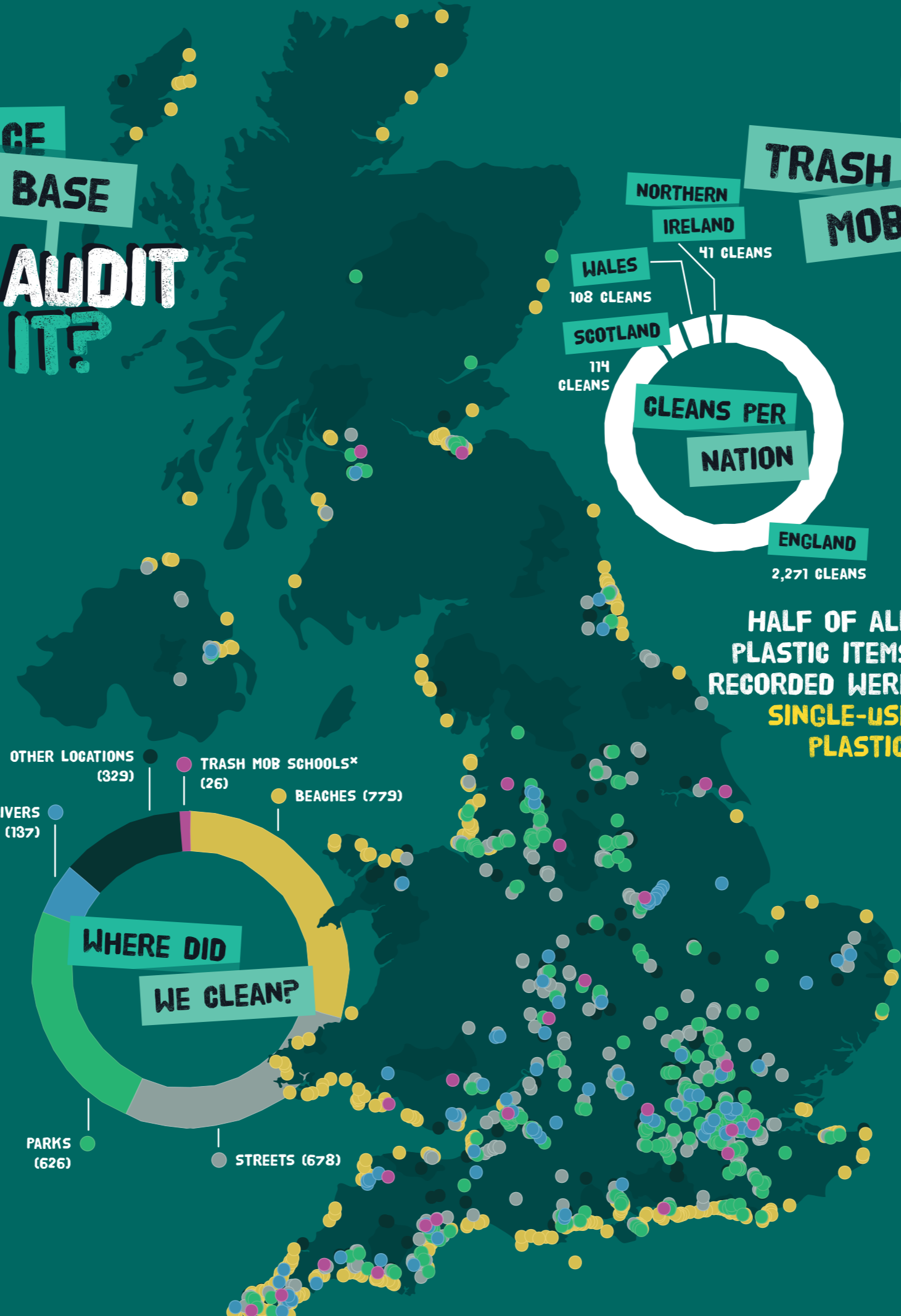
### Brand and items data

The following report analyses the data on both polluting items and brand-level data that volunteers have reported. To date, citizen science data has already proven instrumental in shaping policy, informing legislation, and holding polluters to account. In the UK, Surfers Against Sewage remains one of the few organisations consistently publishing both item and brand-level data.

### The UK's largest citizen science environment-clean dataset yet

With SAS volunteers cleaning thousands of locations across the UK and recording data on nearly every single day of the year, the result is the UK's biggest annual record of citizen science clean data – providing the most accurate snapshot of the pollution we're facing today.

\*Trash Mob data was not included in the data analysis for this year.



Data collected in school grounds through 'Trash Mobs' shows a similar trend to the rest of the UK, further evidencing that pollution is a symptom of the systemic overproduction of single-use plastic packaging, pushed onto consumers with little to no alternatives available.

Across 26 schools, volunteers found...



## WHAT WE FOUND

### Plastic Pollution Plaguing the UK

Over the past few years, plastic has remained the most prevalent pollution recorded, **FOUND IN MORE THAN 85% OF CLEANS IN 2025**. Much of this is single-use plastic packaging which, out of all polluting items recorded, accounted for a total 50% of pollution found.

The sheer scale of this pollution attributed to single-use packaging directly reflects the current state of the UK; we're quickly becoming one of the largest plastic consumers in the world, with UK households throwing away an estimated 1.7 billion items of plastic packaging every single week<sup>1</sup>. Plastic consumption and throwaway culture are out of control. The crisis is fuelled not by consumers, but by the fossil fuel industry expanding plastic production to keep their collapsing business model afloat.

Plastic is simply fossil fuel in disguise – over 99% of plastic is made from oil and gas<sup>2</sup>. As governments began to crack down on carbon emissions, Big Oil and Big Plastic joined forces to secure their future. **THEY'VE POURED BILLIONS INTO NEW PETROCHEMICAL PLANTS** and pushed increasing plastic production. Now one of the fastest-growing uses of fossil fuels, plastic production is set to overtake coal as the biggest driver of oil demand by 2030<sup>3</sup>.

Major consumer brands have become the public face of the big plastic expansion, pumping out endless single-use plastic packaging. These companies are not just profiting at the expense of planetary and human health, but they're contributing to the rapidly rising tide of plastic pollution across the UK. It's time to expose which brands are most responsible and hold them to account.

# EXPOSING THE UK'S TOP POLLUTERS

## THE 2025 DIRTY DOZEN REVEALED



The 2025 Dirty Dozen were responsible for over HALF (52%) of branded pollution found, accounting for **17,331 PIECES OF POLLUTION** collectively in just one year.

Nearly all of the 2025 Dirty Dozen are giant plastic polluters, producing plastic bottles and plastic food wrappers. Only #4 Red Bull, #6 Monster and #9 Stella Artois instead predominantly produce single-use aluminium drinks cans, which can still be lined with plastic and chemicals.

McDonald's also sell products in mixed-material packaging, including plastic. Despite the slight variances in materials, none of this pollution belongs in the environment, threatening ecosystem health.

### RETURN TO OFFENDER

Scan the QR code to take action against the UK's top polluting brands:



## GOING UP THE POWER CHAIN:

### WHO ARE THE POLLUTING PARENT COMPANIES?

While some of the Dirty Dozen brands operate to their own rules, most are instead owned by a handful of powerful global corporations.

These 'parent' companies operate internationally, and with disproportionate global influence, highlighting the systemic roots of the problem – as well as the need for coordinated global action (in addition to UK domestic legislation) if we are to truly resolve the plastic pollution crisis.

#### Same companies, same pollution.

Unsurprisingly, it's the same culprits once again. Year after year, we're finding the same branded pollution swamping the UK. This is not the first time these brands and parent companies have been called out for polluting our environment. So, why are they still coming out top in our UK pollution rankings?

**ALTHOUGH 716 DIFFERENT BRANDS WERE IDENTIFIED, JUST 12 PARENT COMPANIES WERE RESPONSIBLE FOR 65% OF ALL BRANDED ITEMS FOUND.**

- 1 THE *Coca-Cola* COMPANY** 5 YEARS AT THE TOP  
**5,414 items**  
 Brands include: Costa, Fanta, Sprite, Monster, Coca-Cola
- 2  PEPSICO** FOREVER CHASING FIRST POSITION  
**2,628 items**  
 Brands include: Pepsi, Walkers, Rockstar, Doritos
- 3 McDonald's**  
**2,613 items**  
 The McDonald's Corporation is only responsible for one brand, but volunteers still found enough pollution to make third place.
- 4 Mondelez International | 2,586 items**  
 Brands include: Cadbury, Maynards Bassets, Oreo
- 5 Red Bull GmbH | 1,899 items**
- 6 Anheuser-Busch InBev | 1,614 items**  
 Brands include: Stella Artois, Budweiser, Corona
- 7 Heineken N.V. | 1,012 items**  
 Brands include: Heineken, Fosters, Amstel
- 8 Mars Incorporated | 925 items**  
 Brands include: Mars, Galaxy, M&Ms
- 9 Tesco PLC | 856 items**
- 10 Suntory Holdings | 855 items**  
 Brands include: Lucozade
- 11 Haribo GmbH & Co. KG | 768 items**
- 12 AG Barr plc | 625 items**  
 Brands include: Irn Bru, Boost, Rubicon

# A DIRTY SYSTEM MISSED TARGETS, DELAYED POLICY, DIRTY TRICKS

Over the past decade, many polluting brands, parent companies and supermarkets have publicly recognised growing environmental concerns over their plastic and carbon footprints, with many well-known names making ‘sustainability’ a core part of their marketing strategy.

As part of this greenwashing approach, many have responded to consumer demands for sustainable practices by setting plastic reduction, reuse and recycled content targets. The setting of voluntary targets is an approach that has been driven on a global scale with the creation of powerful, programmes such as the ‘Global Commitment’, an agreement launched in 2018 by the Ellen MacArthur Foundation (EMF) and the UN Environment Program, aiming to tackle plastic waste and promote a circular economy.

Over 1,200 organisations have now signed on, including The Coca-Cola Company, PepsiCo, Nestlé and Mars Incorporated, and regularly report their data to EMF so that progress across the sector can be monitored effectively. Many of the Dirty Dozen or their parent companies are signatories.

Finally having tangible goals with metrics in place proved an effective test as to whether brands and companies would deliver on their own without proper regulation... The results?

**POLLUTERS CANNOT SELF-REGULATE.**

**OUR DATA AND INVESTIGATIONS SHOW THAT ALL THIS EFFORT, FROM MULTIMILLION-POUND MARKETING TO BOLD COMMITMENTS AND TARGETS, WAS SIMPLY PURE GREENWASHING AT ITS FINEST.**

We investigated what the top polluting brands have really been up to over the past decade. Spoiler alert, **IT WASN'T INNOVATIVE PRODUCT DESIGN OR CIRCULAR ECONOMY TRANSITION.** The truth is that brands have broken promises, missed their targets, and even gone as far as delaying vital legislation – all while raking in the profits and polluting the environment with endless single-use packaging.

## A DOZEN DIRTY LIES...

**Not a single Dirty Dozen brand met all their 2025 targets to tackle plastic pollution – and worse, many targets were abandoned completely, or simply just ignored.**

With no one really holding these brands to account, their pledges, commitments and 2025 targets have been nothing more than empty words on a page.



Coca-Cola has been particularly vocal in setting ambitious commitments. And they've also led the way in greenwashing consumers, shifting the blame and polluting the environment – coming out as the **#1 POLLUTER FOR THE 5TH YEAR RUNNING.**

From making **MISLEADING CLAIMS** and attempting to redefine ‘Single-Use’ terminology<sup>4</sup>, to showing up in full force at the Global Plastic Treaty, Coca-Cola really have been busy telling Dirty lies. Let's expose them:

### WHAT THEY SAID...

In 2020, Coca-Cola pledged to **REDUCE ITS USE OF VIRGIN PLASTICS, VOWING TO ELIMINATE 3.3 MILLION TONS OF THE MATERIAL** “derived from non-renewable sources” from its supply chain by 2025.<sup>5</sup>

### WHAT THEY DID...

**INSTEAD, THEY INCREASED VIRGIN PLASTIC USE BY 10%** (between 2019 and 2024), resulting in 3,606,000 metric tons of plastic packaging being produced in 2024 alone.<sup>6</sup> And **3,239 POLLUTING COCA-COLA ITEMS** were found in our cleans in 2025 alone.

### WHAT THEY SAID...

In 2022, Coca-Cola pledged to make **25% OF ITS PACKAGING REUSABLE** by 2030.<sup>5</sup>

### WHAT THEY DID...

An admirable goal – but sadly **THIS TARGET WAS ABANDONED.** Reusable packaging sat at a shameful 1.1% in 2024 - (a 3% decrease on 2018).<sup>6</sup>

### WHAT THEY SAID...

In 2024, Coca-Cola ‘evolved’ their voluntary environmental goals:

“By 2035, aim to use **35% TO 40% RECYCLED MATERIAL IN PRIMARY PACKAGING** (plastic, glass and aluminium), including **INCREASING RECYCLED PLASTIC USE TO 30% TO 35% GLOBALLY.**”

### WHAT THEY DID...

In 2024, they watered-down and even completely dropped some of their targets.<sup>7</sup>

Even after extending their timeframe and drastically watering down their target, they **STILL DIDN'T MEET THEIR TARGET**, with post-consumer recycled content sitting at only 18% in 2024.<sup>6</sup>

## McDonald's

McDonald's approach to sustainable packaging is to switch from single-use plastics to alternative materials such as organic-based packaging (e.g. paper and moulded fibre).

Where they use plastic, they aim for it to be from recycled material. Whilst they have trialled reuse schemes in other countries like France, this has been small scale and is yet to be rolled out more widely.

The reality is that in recent years, McDonald's have been aggressively lobbying against laws designed to reduce packaging waste through reuse, leading what's been described as the largest-scale lobbying effort ever witnessed in the European Parliament. Using scientifically questionable, self-funded studies and promoting cherry-picked evidence, they put up a vicious fight against legislation that has the potential to significantly reduce packaging pollution and greenhouse gas emissions<sup>9</sup>.

FOUND IN 1 IN 5 CLEANS  
DIRTY DOZEN MEMBER SINCE 2019  
2,613 ITEMS RECOVERED

### WHAT THEY SAID...

They said that by 2024, **100% OF PACKAGING WILL BE MADE FROM RENEWABLE, RECYCLED OR CERTIFIED SOURCES** and will be **FULLY RECYCLABLE OR COMPOSTABLE**<sup>10</sup>.

### WHAT THEY DID...

#### 100% PROMISED. 90.9% DELIVERED.

In 2024, McDonald's reported 90.93% of packaging met this target. The figure is further weakened by broad definitions of "certified" materials, which can include packaging with only 70% certified content, and sometimes even less sustainably sourced material.

### WHAT THEY SAID...

**REDUCE THE TOTAL PACKAGING MATERIAL USED IN CUSTOMER AND KITCHEN AREAS BY 20%** by 2030, compared with 2023 levels.

### WHAT THEY DID...

#### NO DATA, NO PROGRESS.

McDonald's has not disclosed data showing progress against this target. While it briefly switched plastic hot drink lids to moulded fibre, the change was temporary - **PLASTIC LIDS ARE NOW BACK IN USE.**

### WHAT THEY SAID...

McDonald's have said that by 2027, **ALL RESTAURANT WASTE WILL BE RECYCLED, REUSED OR COMPOSTED**, so none is sent to waste. The company says it is working towards a circular system where materials are kept in use rather than thrown away.

### WHAT THEY DID...

#### THEY ARE ACTIVELY LOBBYING AGAINST REUSABLE PACKAGING.<sup>13,9</sup>

Despite talking about "closing the loop", McDonald's has been a leading voice lobbying against reusable packaging policies. The company argues reuse would weaken its sustainability initiatives, while campaigners and academics say it would require major investment, infrastructure changes and a shift away from the current profitable single-use model.<sup>9</sup>

## Cadbury

Cadburys have set no specific targets or measurements; their parent company Mondelez International do that. The only changes that have been made at Cadburys are recent and extremely narrow focused - for example, opting for 80% ISCC certified recycled plastic in only their 150g and larger bars<sup>14</sup>.

Mondelez's three-part approach to sustainable packaging progress involves reducing and lightweighting its materials; designing its packaging for recyclability, phasing out 'problematic' materials and implementing plastic recycle; and supporting a transition into pEPR schemes and other 'effective' policies by working with policymakers, investors, and other companies<sup>15</sup>.

FOUND IN 1 IN 3 CLEANS  
DIRTY DOZEN MEMBER SINCE 2019  
2,311 ITEMS RECOVERED

### WHAT THEY SAID...

They promised a **25% REDUCTION** in **virgin rigid plastic** and **5% REDUCTION** in **virgin plastic** by 2025 (vs. 2020)<sup>15</sup>.

### WHAT THEY DID...

#### INSTEAD, THEY INCREASED VIRGIN PLASTIC.

Compared to their 2020 baseline, **virgin rigid plastic** use actually **INCREASED** in both 2023 and 2024. Overall **virgin plastic INCREASED** in 2023, and although they reduced virgin plastic use in 2024, they **STILL** missed their overall targets.

### WHAT THEY SAID...

They promised to use **5% RECYCLED PLASTIC CONTENT** by 2025<sup>15</sup>.

### WHAT THEY DID...

#### THEY'RE ON TRACK TO COMPLETELY MISS THEIR TARGET.

In 2024, post-consumer recycled content sat at just **1.6%**<sup>16</sup> - that's a long way to go, to reach their target in one year!

### WHAT THEY SAID...

They said that **98% OR MORE** of their packaging would be **"DESIGNED TO BE" RECYCLABLE** by 2025<sup>15</sup>.

### WHAT THEY DID...

#### "DESIGNED TO BE RECYCLABLE" ISN'T THE SAME AS RECYCLABLE.

Mondelez tracks packaging "designed to be recyclable", not packaging that is truly recyclable. In 2024, 96% met this design metric, but in reality, only **18% WAS ACTUALLY RECYCLABLE, REUSABLE OR COMPOSTABLE (RRC)** according to Ellen MacArthur Foundation data.

# NOT JUST BRANDS: SUPERMARKETS TOO

Supermarkets are one of the biggest producers of single-use plastic packaging. But it's often seen as 'hidden waste' due to mostly being captured in household waste streams, after which it piles up in landfill or gets incinerated – and by that point it's out of sight, out of mind. However, some packaging still leaks into the environment as pollution - which is why UK Supermarkets have found their way into the Dirty Dozen rankings.

As the UK's largest supermarket<sup>17</sup>, Tesco has made it into the Dirty Dozen every single year since our Brand Audit started.

So, we dug into what they're (not) doing to take responsibility and tackle the plastic crisis...

2,363  
SUPERMARKET\*  
ITEMS FOUND  
IN 2025

DIRTY  
DOZEN  
MEMBER  
SINCE  
2019

723  
ITEMS  
RECOVERED



## WHAT THEY SAID...

They said that 100% of their packaging would be **FULLY RECYCLABLE BY DECEMBER 2025**<sup>18</sup>.



## WHAT THEY DID...

### MISSED THEIR ONLY 2025 TARGET.

Only 87% of their "own brand" packaging is recyclable at kerbside in the UK<sup>19</sup>.

Though they claim this stat is closer to 99% with in-store recycling, we're not buying it. A recent investigation revealed that 70% of the soft plastic waste (returned by customers through Tesco and Sainsbury's recycling take-back scheme) was scandalously **BURNED**, not recycled<sup>20</sup>.

## WHAT THEY SAID...

They said where they can't remove plastic packaging completely, their goal is to **REDUCE IT TO AN ABSOLUTE MINIMUM**<sup>18</sup>.



## WHAT THEY DID...

### NO ACTUAL TARGET FIGURES. NO DEADLINE.

This is the closest we could find to a reduction 'target' – broad and vague. Disappointingly, Tesco had no real timebound Reduction target, or reuse/refill target, unlike some of their other competitive supermarket counterparts.



**UK SUPERMARKETS PRODUCE APPROXIMATELY 29.8 BILLION PIECES OF AVOIDABLE PLASTIC PACKAGING EVERY SINGLE YEAR<sup>21</sup>.**

\*Total number of items found during 2025 from Tesco, Asda, Lidl, Aldi, Sainsburys, Morrisons and Co-op

# FAILURE LEFT, RIGHT AND CENTRE

## GUIDE TO ICONS

- Backtracked on commitment
- Failed to deliver
- Where's the plan?
- Delivered (with caveats)

Commitment →	Plastic Reduction	Reuse / Refill	Recycled Material Use	Recyclable Packaging	Pollution Responsibility
<b>Parent Company ↓</b> <i>These organisations have signed the <a href="#">New Plastics Economy Global Commitment</a>, led by the Ellen MacArthur Foundation and report plastic packaging metrics.</i>					
<b>The Coca-Cola Company</b> They lowered, pushed back and abandoned any progressive targets in 2024 – and still did not meet any of their goals.					
<b>Mondelēz International</b> (Parent company of Cadbury) They may have reduced virgin plastic by 5%, but with 0% reuse and only 18% of packaging RRC, they are still far from making progress at the speed required to tackle the issue.					
<b>PepsiCo</b> (parent company of Pepsi and Walkers) PepsiCo abandoned and watered-down targets in pure greenwashing fashion. Quality and credibility of their approach was rated 'very poor' by The Corporate Climate Responsibility Monitor 2025.					
<b>ABInBev</b> (parent company of Stella Artois) Lots of great strategy goals but, with only one timebound target, they have no clear plans to achieving genuine progress. It's simply greenwashed words on paper to look good to consumers.					
<b>Mars Incorporated</b> Mars talk a big game, but their focus is still on recyclability. With a flatlined reuse rate of 0%, they're literally going backwards on reducing virgin plastics, INCREASING use.					
<b>Parent Company ↓</b> <i>These companies own or operate multiple consumer brands, but are not signatories to the global commitment.</i>					
<b>Suntory Holdings</b> (parent company of Lucozade) Suntory's priority is to 'accelerate circularity', but their consideration of circularity does not pass beyond recycling.					
<b>McDonald's</b> Leading the lobbying against reuse. Very little data to track their progress - but plenty of greenwashing claims & tactics!					
<b>Brand* ↓</b> <i>These are product brands rather than corporate parent companies.</i>					
<b>Red Bull</b> Red Bull are not taking any real responsibility for getting their cans into the recycling system or championing a circular economy.					
<b>Walkers</b> No targets, no ambition - Sort it out.					
<b>Monster</b> Monster don't have a clear plan on what to do about the issue. They should be advocating for better systems to recapture their cans and address littering.					
<b>Haribo</b> They state general aims but have absolutely no real targets or data to track progress. It's time they step up and take some responsibility.					
<b>Tesco</b> Only one real target set focusing on downstream measures. It's clear they won't step up, unless the UK Government force them to.					

The results were more than shocking, showcasing a resounding failure across the Dirty Dozen to tackle the issue. They have done next to nothing to take action.

### Reuse/ Refill

Even though moving to reuse models can provide an estimated >20% reduction in total annual plastic leakage to the ocean by 2040<sup>24</sup>, for most brands, reuse is still not even a consideration. But, of the five who did set Reuse Targets, the outcomes were outrageous:

- ➔ The highest recorded refill rate across the board was a pitiful 1.1%, from Coca-Cola, which was in fact a 3% decrease from their 2018 rate – proving that progress on reuse has not only stalled, but is going backwards.
- ➔ Two parent companies (Mondelez and Mars) reported 0% reuse rates in 2024.
- ➔ Two parent companies (Coca-Cola and PepsiCo) abandoned their targets altogether.
- ➔ Even worse, McDonald's has been aggressively lobbying against reuse<sup>13,9</sup> and plastic policies in the UK<sup>25</sup>.

### Plastic Reduction

Of the five who actually set Reduction Targets:

- ➔ Two parent companies (Coca-Cola and Mars) actually INCREASED virgin plastic use in 2024, rather than working towards their targets.
- ➔ PepsiCo and Mondelez were the only companies who met their targets, with Mondelez achieving a 5% reduction (from 2020 baseline). However, PepsiCo only met their target after setting themselves a new, watered-down goal. And in fact, PepsiCo actually had a 5.57% INCREASE in virgin plastic use in 2023 from their 2020 baseline, cancelling out any reductions made.
- ➔ And the last, McDonald's, has no reported data available to track progress (or lack thereof).

### Recycling and Recycled Content

For nearly all brands and parent companies, the focus remains predominantly on recyclability, even where recycling capacities don't yet exist. Despite this being the area with the most regulations and reporting, there are still lots of missed targets and obfuscated metrics. In true greenwashing style, Brands prefer to track 'designed for recycling', as opposed to actual recyclability of packaging, allowing them to claim progress while ignoring whether products can actually be recycled or not.

With limited and inconsistent recycling infrastructure in the UK, this results in huge disparities between metrics. One example being with flexible plastics, in which many brands have made their packaging 'recyclable at supermarkets' and petitioned for Kerbside recycling (due to launch in 2027). But unfortunately, the capacity to recycle flexible plastics in the UK remains very limited and, without significant funding, is predicted to collapse under the sheer volumes being produced<sup>26</sup>.

### Taking responsibility for pollution

When we dig into the extent to which brands are (not) taking responsibility for their packaging, their messaging remains largely unchanged. Brands repeatedly suggest the focus should be on consumers, third sector organisations, and local authorities to deal with the issue<sup>25</sup>. There is very little consideration of the harm caused by materials used or of their packaging when it leaks into the environment. Most still consider simply sticking a 'recycle-me' label on their packaging as job done.

So, whilst their branding, websites and adverts may look like these companies care about tackling their plastic and packaging problems, it's important not to be fooled. And after unpacking the promises and exposing the lies, it's crystal clear that the Dirty Dozen have no real ambition or willingness to take any genuine responsibility in tackling the issue. **THEY MUST BE HELD TO ACCOUNT.**

BRANDS DERAILING POLICY & LEGISLATION

# DRS & EPR

## WHAT ARE THEY...

**DEPOSIT RETURN SCHEMES (DRS)** and **EXTENDED PRODUCER RESPONSIBILITY (EPR)**, working together, are the solutions designed to tackle pollution by reducing single-use packaging waste, improving

recycling rates, and preventing litter from leaking into the environment. They aren't radical ideas, they're **PROVEN, PRACTICAL TOOLS** already working across Europe.

## ...AND WHY DO THEY MATTER?

With all the 2025 Dirty Dozen brands being producers of food and drink packaging, most of their products should be covered by either DRS or a type of packaging EPR, called pEPR.

Six of the twelve brands are primarily beverage companies, producing plastic bottles, aluminium cans and glass bottles, meaning that approximately anywhere up to 50% of the Dirty Dozen's pollution could have been prevented from entering the environment if an all-in DRS (that includes glass) was in place, rather than being consistently delayed.

**“**Our brand audits reveal an alarming truth: too many bottles and cans continue to pollute our environment when they could easily be recycled. It's a clear signal that we urgently need a Deposit Return Scheme to move towards a true zero-waste future.”  
Peter Hoyland - Community Lead Plastic Free Exmoor.

We can't wait any longer. Pollution will keep pouring into the environment until DRS goes live. So, why has it taken the UK so long to implement these policies? Because polluting brands have spent years lobbying for delay - and the UK government has listened.

### WHAT IS THE DEPOSIT RETURN SCHEME?

A SYSTEM WHERE YOU PAY A SMALL DEPOSIT WHEN YOU BUY A DRINK IN A PLASTIC BOTTLE OR METAL CAN, AND GET THAT MONEY BACK WHEN YOU RETURN THE EMPTY CONTAINER.

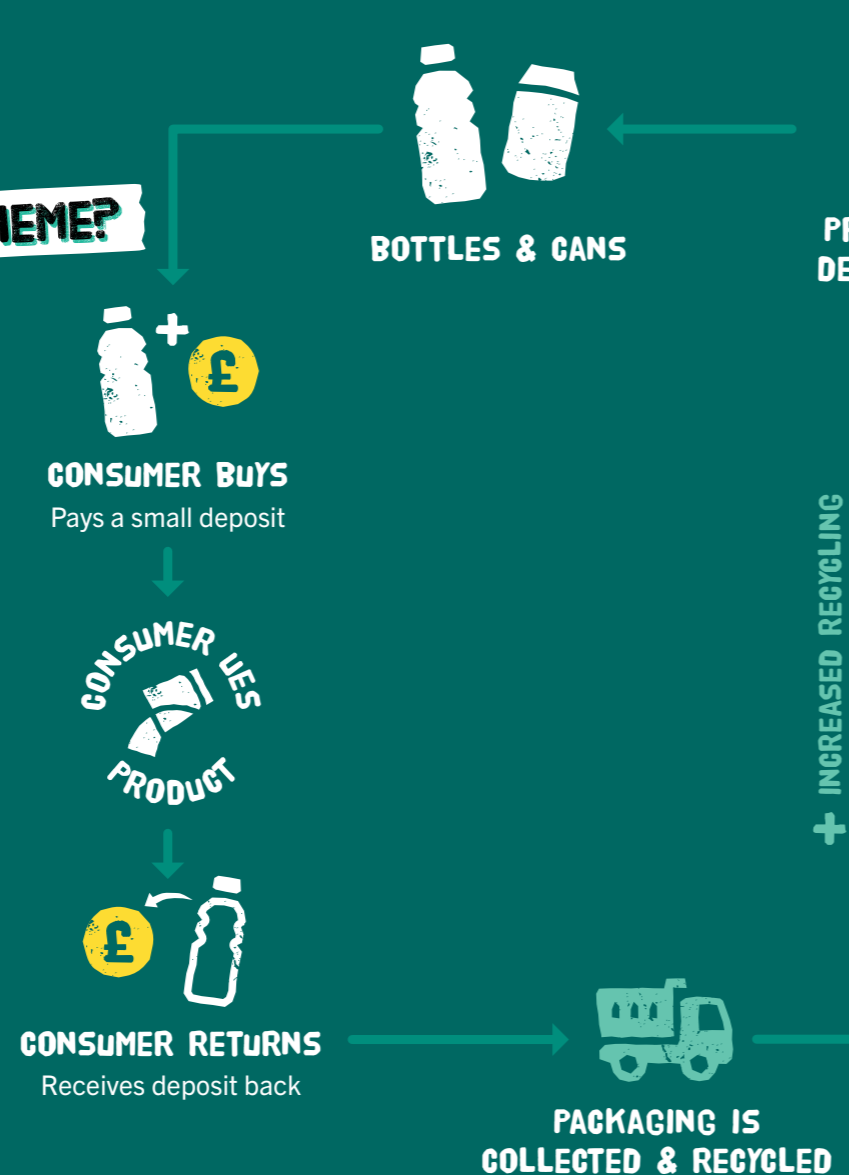
In short, DRS encourages people to return bottles and cans so they are recycled instead of thrown away.

It's designed to tackle...

LITTERING OF BOTTLES & CANS

LOW RECYCLING RATES OF SINGLE-USE DRINKS CONTAINERS

WASTE FROM 'ON-THE-GO' CONSUMPTION



### WHAT IS EXTENDED PRODUCER RESPONSIBILITY?

A POLICY THAT MAKES PRODUCERS (BRANDS AND MANUFACTURERS) RESPONSIBLE FOR THE FULL COST OF MANAGING THEIR PACKAGING WASTE.

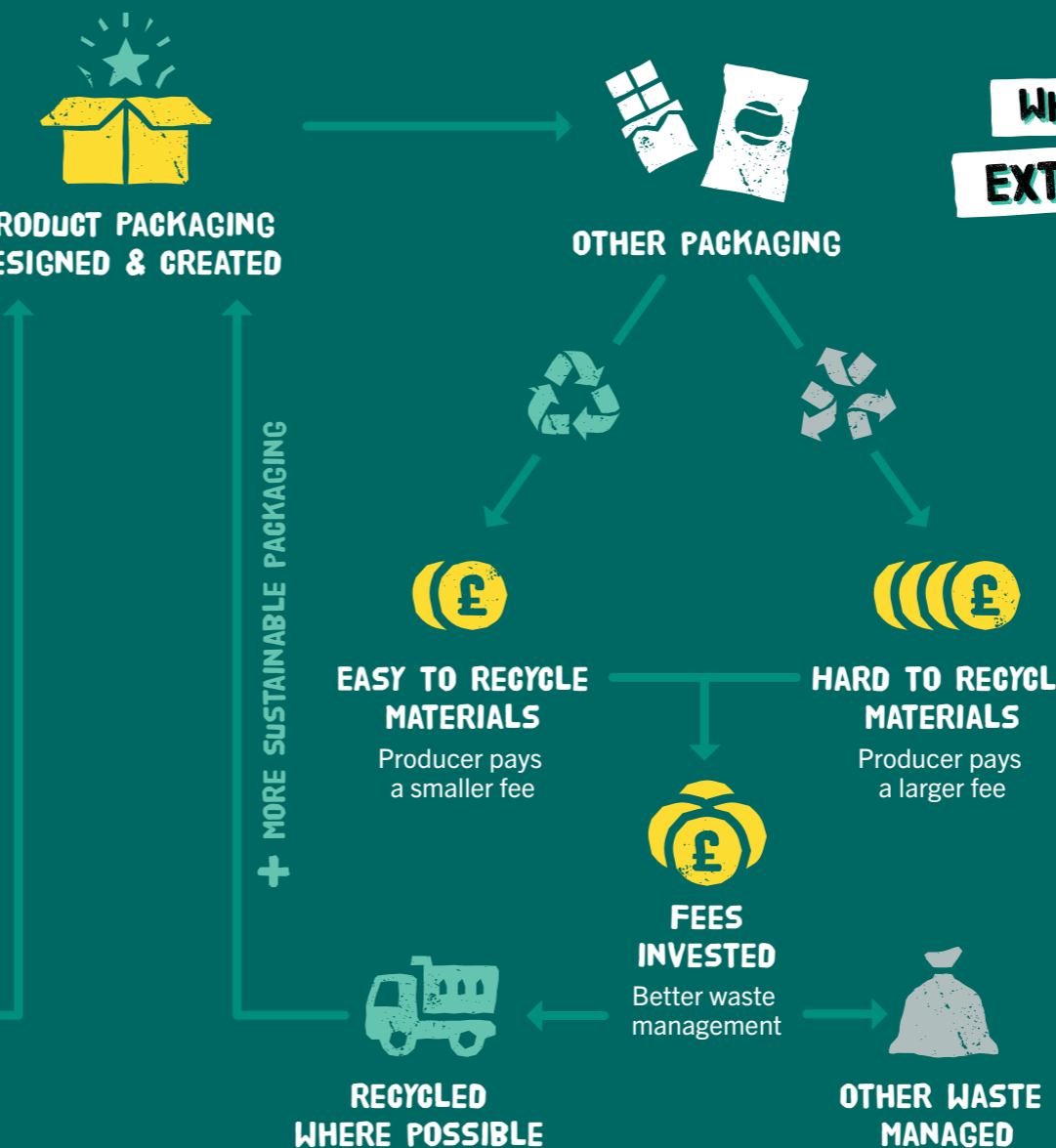
In short, EPR pushes companies to use less packaging, improve product design, and make packaging more easily recyclable.

It's designed to tackle...

EXCESSIVE SINGLE-USE PACKAGING

HARD-TO-RECYCLE PACKAGING

THE COST BURDEN ON TAX PAYERS & LOCAL AUTHORITIES



# POWERFUL LOBBYING

To maintain the status quo and protect their profits, the Dirty Dozen have relied on two parallel strategies. Publicly, they've deployed well-polished greenwashing narratives promoting recycling solutions. Meanwhile, privately, they've engaged in lobbying to block, delay and weaken the policies that would otherwise successfully reduce plastic pollution.

Lobbying is a legitimate part of UK democracy, but limited transparency and regulatory loopholes allow powerful sectors to exert disproportionate influence. In recent years, brands that produce plastic packaging have become particularly active lobbyists. And the 2025 Dirty Dozen were found to be privately lobbying against policies they publicly claim to support, directly contradicting their sustainability commitments and exposing their own hypocrisy.

Rather than acting alone, brands often work through **MULTI-STAKEHOLDER GROUPS** (e.g. trade associations, industry coalitions and collaboration initiatives). While on the surface, these groups appear to work collaboratively to tackle plastic and packaging pollution across the sector, they can also act as smoke and mirrors - enabling brands to pool influence while maintaining their 'green' public image.

In recent years, the Dirty Dozen – through various associations – have repeatedly lobbied **AGAINST** stronger plastic regulations, notably including Extended Producer Responsibility (pEPR), Deposit Return Schemes (DRS), plastic taxes and reuse mandates. The result has been years of stalled progress and watered-down ambition. And mounting pollution.

The following association table depicts which brands are involved in different multi-stakeholder groups.

IN RECENT YEARS, THE DIRTY DOZEN – THROUGH VARIOUS ASSOCIATIONS – HAVE REPEATEDLY LOBBIED AGAINST STRONGER PLASTIC REGULATIONS, EPR, DRS, PLASTIC TAXES AND REUSE MANDATES.

Group ↓	Brand* →	Coca-Cola	McDonald's	Cadbury	Red Bull	WALKERS	Lucozade	PEPSI	STELLA + ARTOIS	HARIBO	TESCO	MARS
<b>A Circular Economy for flexible packaging (CEFLEX)</b> Active in shaping policy debates. Advocates recycling system expansion rather than material reduction bans.				✗				✗				✗
<b>British Retail Consortium</b> Play active UK lobbying role.			✗								✗	
<b>British Soft Drinks Association (BSDA)</b> Clear UK lobbying role - pushed for changes to DRS design and delayed implementation timelines.		✗			✗		✗	✗			✗	
<b>Consumer Goods Forum</b> Active in shaping policy debates.		✗	✗	✗			✗	✗	✗		✗	✗
<b>Food and Drink Federation (UK)</b> Play active UK lobbying role		✗		✗		✗	✗	✗		✗		✗
<b>Industry Council for Packaging and the Environment (INCPEN)</b> Play active UK lobbying role		✗	✗		✗			✗			✗	
<b>Paper Cup and RRG</b> Active in shaping policy debates. Advocates infrastructure solutions instead of reduction measures.			✗									✗

The following associations are through each respective brand's parent company: Cadbury: Mondelez, Lucozade: Suntory, Stella Artois: ABInBev, Pepsi: PepsiCo.



# DELAY, DELAY, DELAY

DRS and pEPR policies were first being seriously considered in 2016, at which point all the main associations (including the Food and Drink Federations, British Retail Consortium, Industry Council for Packaging and the Environment and British Soft Drinks Association – which collectively represent 10 of the Dirty Dozen) strongly opposed the policies, pushing for delays and advocating to maintain the status quo.

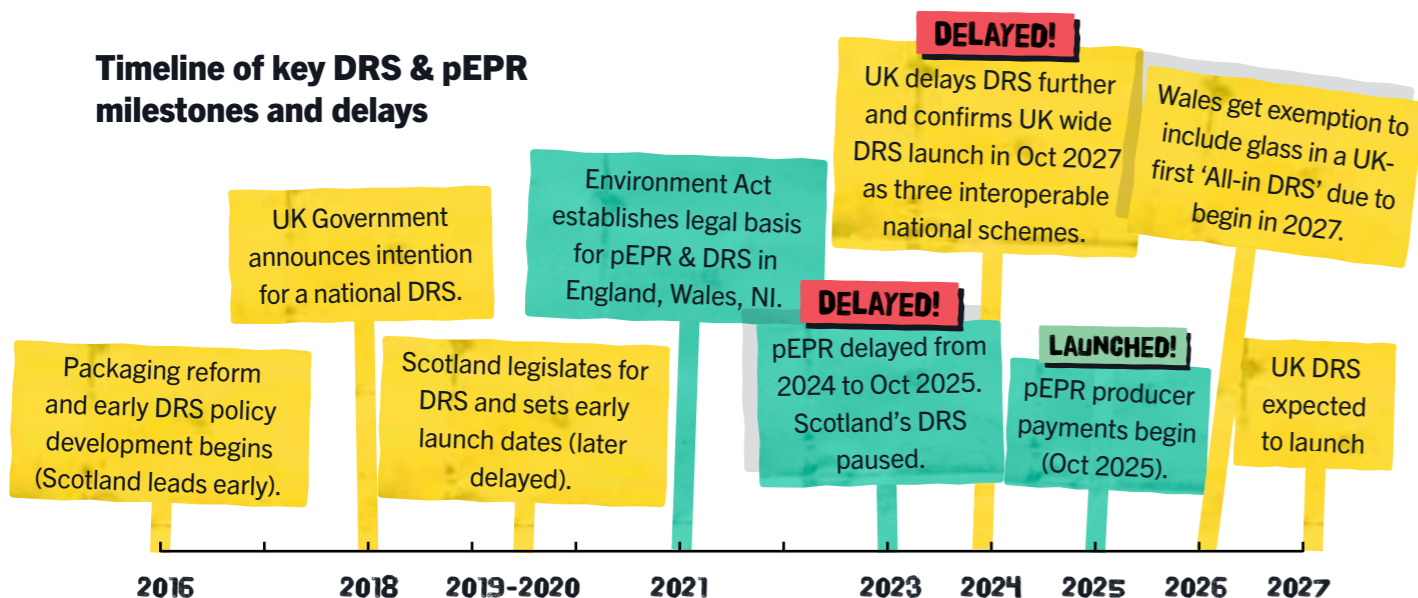
Lobbyists successfully lowered pEPR fees and a £1.7bn packaging tax was deferred<sup>27</sup>. Following monthly meetings with lobbyists, from which Environmental Organisations were excluded, the UK Government announced the pEPR scheme would be delayed a year<sup>27</sup>.

**DRS IS STILL NOT YET LIVE IN THE UK, AFTER BEING SUBJECT TO MULTIPLE DELAYS, AND IS NOT DUE ROLLOUT UNTIL 2027.**

But the British Retail Consortium – which includes Tesco – are using Wales’s commitment to keeping glass in their system as reason to lobby for yet more delays<sup>28</sup>. Despite the lobbying, Tesco and Coca-Cola have representatives sitting on the board of UK DMO, to facilitate DRS in England, Scotland, and Northern Ireland. And so, their activities warrant particular scrutiny to ensure the scheme doesn’t get delayed again. As track records show, government promises can be broken under any ounce of pressure from industry lobbyists.

But with every second costing the earth, we – and wildlife - can’t afford any further delays. The effects of sustained lobbying from the Dirty Dozen have so far contributed to delays to each piece of legislation. As a result, pEPR is at least one year later than scheduled and DRS in Scotland was delayed by at least four years.

## Timeline of key DRS & pEPR milestones and delays



## WHAT POLLUTION COULD HAVE BEEN AVOIDED IF DRS & EPR WERE LIVE?

In recent years, many brands appear to have changed their tune. On the surface, they now all publicly agree with and advocate for EPR and DRS. But in reality, they remain critical and continue to push for diluted ambition with only incremental changes at best.



## WHAT THIS LOOKS LIKE IN NUMBERS...

**80%**

OF SINGLE-USE PACKAGING FOUND WOULD HAVE BEEN COVERED BY pEPR.

**50%**

OF SINGLE-USE PACKAGING FOUND WOULD HAVE BEEN COVERED BY DRS.

ACROSS ALL POLLUTING ITEMS RECORDED BY VOLUNTEERS,

**33,781**

ITEMS OF POLLUTING WASTE COULD HAVE BEEN COVERED BY ACTIVE pEPR POLICIES IN 2025 ALONE - THAT’S 32%!

AND

**21,094**

ITEMS COULD HAVE BEEN COVERED BY DRS (20%).

# WATERING-DOWN POLICIES

DRS and EPR could both be significantly strengthened, by shifting their focus from downstream waste management to upstream plastic reduction. The recent move of the brands' language to approving pEPR, and to a lesser extent DRS, appears to be focused on a desire to control the conversation around implementation, to continue advocating for weaker and more flexible regulations, and to avoid the radical systems changes that are required.

While pEPR aims to incentivise producers to design more sustainable products, evidence suggests that without complementary measures - such as mandatory recycled content targets, higher fees for virgin plastic, or outright bans on problematic packaging - it has a limited impact on reducing overall plastic production<sup>29</sup>.

Similarly, DRS schemes are highly effective at increasing collection rates, but their ability to drive systemic change is weakened when producer fees are not differentiated by environmental impact, allowing companies to continue using hard-to-recycle plastics with minimal financial penalty<sup>47</sup>.

Industry lobbyists have repeatedly opposed such reforms, advocating for recycling-focused solutions rather than production limits, despite strong evidence that recycling alone cannot address plastic pollution at scale.

Strengthening pEPR and DRS would therefore require isolating policy-making from industry influence, increasing transparency around lobbying, and prioritising legally binding measures that reduce plastic use at source rather than relying predominantly on voluntary **COMMITMENTS** or end-of-life solutions.

## Big brands on a global stage

The 2025 Dirty Dozen's bad behaviour wasn't limited to the UK alone – they've been playing big dirty games on a global scale too. As governments attempted to negotiate a Global Plastics Treaty, a crucial opportunity to turn off the plastic tap at source and turn the tide on pollution, the pro-plastic industry made sure their voice was heard. And they showed up in full force.

At the most recent negotiations, INC5.2 in August 2025, a record-breaking number of 234 pro-plastic, fossil fuel and chemical industry lobbyists flooded the talks, outnumbering scientists four to one and pushing back against production caps, reuse targets and binding rules. Amongst them were at least six Dirty Dozen brands\*. All publicly "supporting action" yet privately working to weaken it.



Surfers Against Sewage protesting outside the UN, during the 2025 INC.5 negotiations, demanding that: UK government's global ambitious speeches become **LEGITIMATE ACTION AT HOME**, and that the **OCEAN AND COMMUNITIES** – not dirty brand profits – **ARE PUT FIRST**.

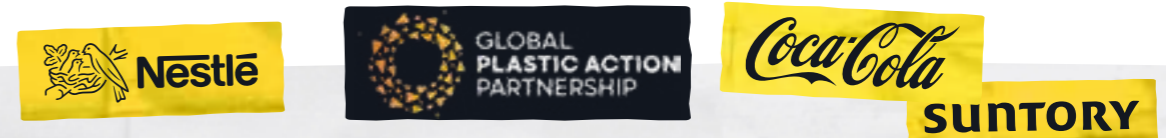
## WHICH COALITIONS HAVE DIRTY BRANDS\* HIDING IN THEM?



**"TRANSLATING COMMITMENTS TO REDUCE PLASTIC POLLUTION INTO CONCRETE ACTION."**

Following INC5, the Business Coalition issued a statement reaffirming its commitment to "sustainable levels of production" and a treaty "based on global rules across the full lifecycle of plastics"<sup>31</sup>. While this might suggest genuine support for strong plastic

regulation, these commitments are not as bold as they sound. They're instead rooted in an approach that relies on **ENHANCED RECYCLING** and on targeting "**SHORT-LIVED**" **PLASTICS** with "**HIGH-LEAKAGE RATES**", rather than with outright reductions in single-use plastics<sup>30</sup>.



**"... SUPPORTING THE DEVELOPMENT OF AN AMBITIOUS, EFFECTIVE AND LEGALLY BINDING UN TREATY TO END PLASTIC POLLUTION"**

Research demonstrated that GPAP (along with AEPW) are key components of a hedging strategy, **DESIGNED TO UNDERMINE** stricter regulations and petition for a weak treaty that focuses on individual responsibility and 'recyclability'.

They claim to advance a circular economy for plastics, but instead often **SERVE TO PROTECT EXISTING BUSINESS MODELS** under the guise of sustainability<sup>30</sup>.



**"ADVANCING A CIRCULAR ECONOMY FOR PLASTIC"**

Arguably the worst of the bunch, the Alliance to End Plastic Waste (AEPW) consists mostly of **PLASTICS PRODUCERS** and **PETROCHEMICAL COMPANIES**, including ExxonMobil and Dow.

They strongly opposed mandatory production caps, upstream measures and strong lifecycle obligations – which are all **VITAL** to an ambitious treaty.

\*From Brand Audits since 2023

# TIME TO KEEP PROFITING

The polluter's lobbying has successfully bought themselves more time. Time to keep producing. Time to keep polluting. **Time to keep profiting.**

## Saving money on DRS delay

DRS and pEPR are supposed to work together in tandem. Although pEPR finally launched in 2025, DRS is still not due to go live until October 2027. As long as DRS is delayed, not only is plastic left to pollute the environment, but there's also a policy gap – conveniently creating a temporary loophole for many of the Dirty Dozen...

## The policy gap and fee loophole explained:

- ➔ Without a DRS in place, DRS-eligible drinks containers (plastic/aluminium/steel bottles and cans) are currently ending up in household waste streams – and therefore should be subject to pEPR fees.
- ➔ Where pEPR fees on drinks containers currently should apply, the government has chosen to exempt them from pEPR disposal fees until the DRS scheme is live.
- ➔ Consequently, brands producing high volumes of PET bottles and aluminium cans are currently not paying any fees on these products, meaning many of the Dirty Dozen are still getting away with profiting from pollution.
- ➔ The government's decision to create this pay gap was to 'avoid double charging'. But with most plastic bottles and drinks cans being single-use, we highly doubt this would be an issue. Single-use drinks containers used today are more likely to end up in the environment or landfill, rather than be reused and finally captured by DRS in 2027. It sounds to us more like a lack of political will – with the government letting polluters win, once again.

## Who's benefiting the most?

As big beverage producers, Coca-Cola, Pepsi, Red Bull, Monster and Lucozade are benefiting the most from the policy pay gap, exempt from paying fees. Tesco, McDonald's and Stella Artois have products in mixed packaging, meaning they benefit from the loophole with some items, which may be DRS-eligible, but much of their packaging is now liable under pEPR.

## Meanwhile, the profits poured in.

While communities pay the price of plastic pollution, the Dirty Dozen continue to pocket the profits.

**IN 2024 ALONE, BRANDS\* IN THE DIRTY DOZEN AMASSED AN EYE-WATERING £30 BILLION IN PROFIT.**

\* Some figures taken from parent companies, where individual brand data was not available.



**BRANDS PRODUCING HIGH VOLUMES OF PET BOTTLES AND ALUMINIUM CANS ARE CURRENTLY NOT PAYING ANY FEES ON THESE PRODUCTS**



# THE BIG PICTURE

# A WAVE OF PLASTIC POLLUTION

Whilst this report hones in on the top polluters – those most responsible for the single-use packaging that continues to pervasively pollute the environment – our volunteers also collected data on all the different types of pollution found.

We dove into the data which revealed some interesting patterns across the UK...

## NORTHERN IRELAND

Northern Ireland's top 3 items:

1. MURDLES (301)
2. CAN (DRINK) (275)
3. CRISP / SWEET PACKET (179)

Northern Ireland's Dirty Dozen additions:

- #6 WKD (30)
- #7 BUDWEISER (30)

#1  
**Coca-Cola**  
147 ITEMS

#2  
**Red Bull**  
79 ITEMS

#3  
**BOOST**  
73 ITEMS

NORTHERN IRELAND'S WEIRDEST FIND...

A miniature vending machine

## WALES

Wales's top 3 items:

1. PLASTIC (OTHER) (782)
2. PLASTIC FRAGMENTS (459)
3. CRISP / SWEET PACKET (452)

#1  
**McDonald's**  
92 ITEMS

#2  
**Cadbury**  
90 ITEMS

#3  
**Coca-Cola**  
89 ITEMS

Wales's Dirty Dozen additions:

- #5 NESTLE (48)
- #11 BUDWEISER (31)

WALES'S WEIRDEST FIND...

The side of a Wendy house

SCOTLAND'S WEIRDEST FIND...

Huge amount of cans (particularly Irn Bru)

## SCOTLAND

Scotland's Dirty Dozen additions:

- #4 DESPERADO (190)
- #8 IRN BRU (83)

#1  
**McDonald's**  
435 ITEMS

#2  
**Coca-Cola**  
349 ITEMS

#3  
**Cadbury**  
284 ITEMS

Scotland's top 3 items:

1. PLASTIC (OTHER) (1,238)
2. CRISP / SWEET PACKET (582)
3. CIGARETTE BUTT (550)

## ENGLAND

ENGLAND'S WEIRDEST FIND...

A Bee Gees vinyl single

#1  
**Coca-Cola**  
2,636 ITEMS

#2  
**McDonald's**  
2,057 ITEMS

#3  
**Cadbury**  
1,870 ITEMS

England's Dirty Dozen additions:

- #12 COSTA (566)

England's top 3 items:

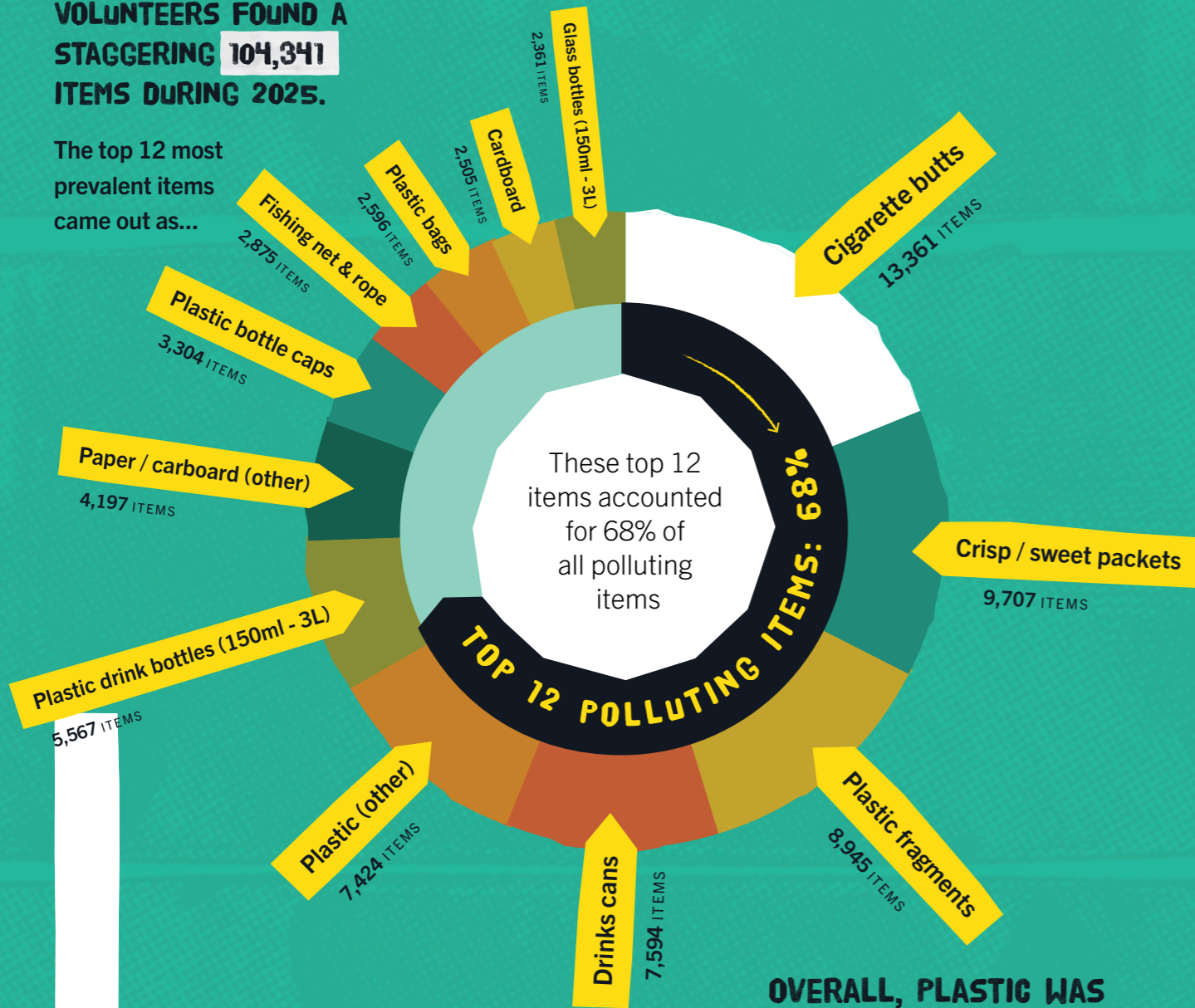
1. CIGARETTE BUTT (12,460)
2. CRISP / SWEET PACKET (8,487)
3. PLASTIC FRAGMENTS (8,084)



# THE MOST POLLUTING ITEMS

VOLUNTEERS FOUND A STAGGERING **104,341** ITEMS DURING 2025.

The top 12 most prevalent items came out as...



**OVERALL, PLASTIC WAS THE MOST PREVALENT TYPE OF POLLUTION FOUND, ACCOUNTING FOR ALMOST HALF OF ALL POLLUTION FOUND**

Material	Quantity (Items)
Plastic	46,714
Smoking	18,845
Paper & Cardboard	10,345
Metal	10,252
Fishing	6,606
Glass & Ceramic	3,486
Wood	1,960
Personal Care	1,779
Textiles	1,319
Rubber	1,269
Other	1,202
Medical	564

## POLLUTION SPOTLIGHT

# CIGARETTE BUTTS

In 2025, Cigarette Butts were the most polluting items found in terms of quantity, with 13,358 butts collected.

This reflects the fact that cigarette butts remain the most discarded piece of waste globally, with trillions improperly disposed of each year. Composed of non-biodegradable cellulose acetate, which is a form of plastic, cigarette butts can persist in the environment for decades. They leach toxic substances into waterways and soil, causing irreversible environmental damage.



6. THE BIG PICTURE



## PLASTIC FREE EXMOUTH

Plastic Free Exmouth are an awarded Plastic Free Community in Devon, who are working tirelessly to protect their local beach from harmful plastic pollution – such as cigarette butts.

Current policies fail to hold tobacco companies accountable for the environmental consequences of their products, and public awareness about the impacts of cigarette litter remains insufficient. SAS support demands for producers to take responsibility for products through the whole life-cycle with stronger ERP and tougher regulations around product design.



**“**In the first nine months of 2025, we collected over 1.2 tonnes of rubbish on our Sunday morning beach cleans. We find a huge number of cigarette butts. Our Cigarette Butt Campaign has seen four Cigarette Butt ‘Ballot’ Bins installed already at key locations in the Town. This is an ongoing campaign.”  
Jill Gathercole, Plastic Free Exmouth



**POLLUTION SPOTLIGHT**

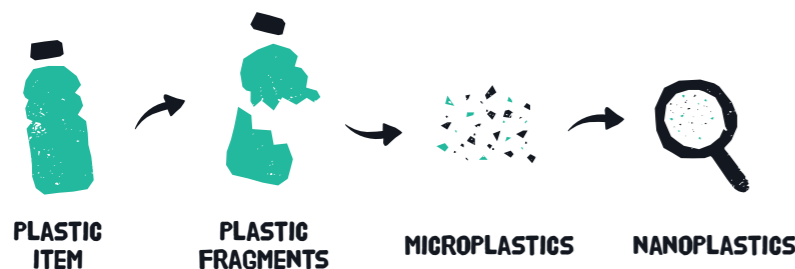
# PLASTIC FRAGMENTS



It's no surprise that plastic fragments came out in the **top 3 most polluting items in 2025**, given that plastic has been pouring into the ocean and environment at a colossal scale for decades.

When exposed to harsh environments, such as the ocean and high UV, **PLASTIC POLLUTION EVENTUALLY BREAKS DOWN** into smaller and smaller pieces – which not only get increasingly harder to clean up but also find their way into more places they shouldn't, presenting further serious health hazards.

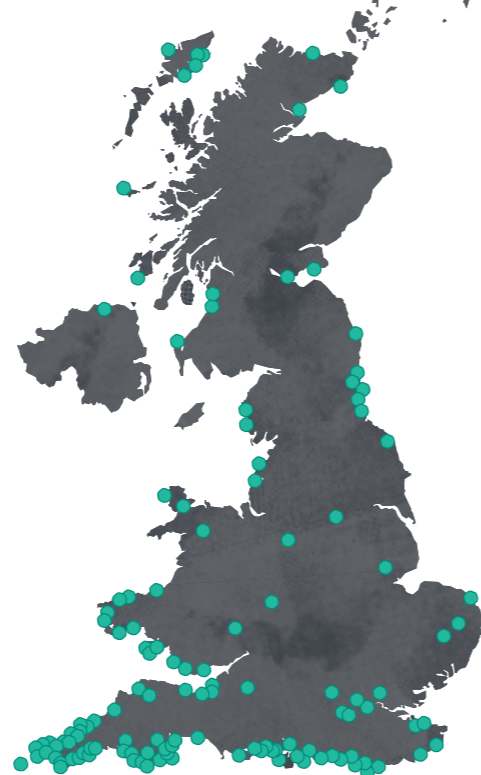
**THE JOURNEY TO BECOMING MICROPLASTICS:**



Whilst SAS campaign to stop plastic pollution at the source, to prevent further plastic pollution piling up in the ocean and breaking down, we also demand reduction targets for virgin plastic pellets, microplastic monitoring in waterways, advanced wastewater treatment and product design standards to tackle microplastics.

**ACROSS THE UK OUR COMMUNITIES FOUND 16,369 PLASTIC FRAGMENTS AND 'OTHER' PLASTIC ITEMS DURING 2025.**

The problem is likely to be far larger, as microplastics and nanoplastics are too small to collect.



**POLLUTION SPOTLIGHT**

# FISHING GEAR

On beaches, in both 2024 and 2025, fishing gear was **one of the most polluting item categories** – second only to other (non-fishing related) plastics.

Abandoned, lost, or discarded fishing gear, commonly known as ghost gear, is one of the most **DEADLY** and **PERSISTENT** forms of marine plastic pollution. Designed to trap and kill, ghost gear continues to entangle fish, seals, whales, dolphins, turtles and seabirds long after it is lost, while also damaging vital marine habitats and contributing to microplastic contamination.

While SAS and our communities play our part in the clean-up of this devastating debris, this multi-faceted problem requires several solutions spanning areas of Marine Protection, Fisheries Policy, EPR and material tracking and recycling.

We support demands for **STRONGER NATIONAL & INTERNATIONAL REGULATIONS**, along with **INCREASED SUPPORT FOR FISHERS**, to tackle the issue.

For Newcastle-based Rep, Kasim Shariff, fishing gear was the most common find on his cleans:

**GG** It's vital we stop plastic pollution, not just to protect our unique flora and fauna, but also our own health. As a marine biology student, I've seen firsthand how plastics devastate wildlife and without action, I fear my local community will be next."  
Kasim Mahedi Shariff, SAS Regional Rep.



**FISHING GEAR WAS FOUND ON**

**59%**

**OF BEACH CLEANS DURING 2025\***

\*Fishing gear was found on 261 clean events out of 442 beach cleans where any item data was submitted.



## POLLUTION SPOTLIGHT

# PLASTIC BAGS ARE BACK!

Our data reveals that pollution from plastic bags is on the rise again. In 2024 and 2025, plastic bags were in the top 10 most polluting items found – and were even #3 in Scotland.

Research by DEFRA suggests that Supermarkets could be to blame, given that online supermarket chains are responsible for 88% of single-use plastic bag sales in the UK<sup>32</sup>. 2024 marked the first time sales have risen since the 5p bag charge was introduced in 2015, with sales rising by 7%<sup>32</sup>. This rise in consumption directly mirrors the rise in pollution found on our cleans, evidencing that we can't end plastic pollution without enforced production caps and item bans in place.

We are calling on the UK Government to implement:



### LEGALLY BINDING TARGETS TO CUT PLASTICS

**PRODUCTION:** Governments must set legally binding targets to cut plastic production and consumption.



### TACKLE THE WORST POLLUTING SINGLE-USE PLASTICS:

Through the enforcement of existing legislation and expansion of bans government and regulators must tackle the worst polluting single use plastics on UK beaches.

**2024 MARKED THE FIRST TIME PLASTIC BAG SALES HAVE RISEN SINCE THE 5P BAG CHARGE.**



## POLLUTION SPOTLIGHT

# BIOMEDIA

Biomedias sit at the interface of two of the biggest threats currently facing the ocean: Sewage and plastic pollution. They are a small type of plastic used in the process of wastewater treatment.

But following decades of chronic under-investment from water companies, infrastructure failures are causing mass and widespread pollution – often with millions of small biomedias leaking into the environment. Due to the nature of their use, **BIOMEDIA OFTEN CARRY HARMFUL, TOXIC SUBSTANCES** and consequently present a major threat to the environment.

Though present in different shapes and sizes, from discs and wheels to pellets, the most difficult to clean up are bio-beads. A recent Category 1 (the most serious pollution) incident at Camber Sands highlighted the **CATASTROPHIC ENVIRONMENTAL HARM** bio-bead spills can cause, presenting ongoing risks to marine and coastal ecosystems.

But Camber Sands isn't the only beach suffering. Our data exposes that this pollution has far-reaching consequences; **SPILLS HAVE BEEN HAPPENING FOR DECADES, ALL ACROSS THE UK.**

SAS are campaigning for a transformational change of the water sector, which would ensure money flows into infrastructure investment rather than shareholders' pockets. We'll also continue to push for tougher regulation, transparency and reporting around biomedias usage and spills, regulation and phase-out biomedias, environmental remediation to hold polluters accountable, and further research and monitoring to understand the scale and impact of biomedias pollution.

**IF THE DATA TELLS US ONE THING, IT'S THAT WE SIMPLY CAN'T CLEAN AND RECYCLE OUR WAY OUT OF THIS PROBLEM.** A plastic tide has swept across the globe, and the UK is becoming increasingly responsible. We've got to put a stop to brands polluting; they must pay the price. It's time to turn the tide on plastic pollution, and that means turning off the tap at source.



# WHAT NEEDS TO CHANGE?

## GLOBAL PROMISES, DOMESTIC FAILURE

**On the global stage, the UK Government talks a big game about tackling plastic pollution. But what really matters is what happens at home.**

In the UK, there's a growing gap between international promises and domestic action. While ministers claim to support ambitious solutions to the plastic crisis, progress on the ground has been slow, inconsistent and repeatedly delayed. Key policies that would reduce plastic pollution at source have been stalled, watered down or pushed back – letting the powerful brands and industry lobbyists win.

When governments fail to turn words into action, plastic production continues unchecked, pollution piles up in our communities, and the costs are passed onto councils, taxpayers and, most unacceptably, the environment.

**GLOBAL LEADERSHIP STARTS AT HOME. BUT RIGHT NOW, THE UK IS FALLING SHORT.**



## THE UK GOVERNMENT MUST ACT

### Stop funding the plastic problem

Even as it speaks about tackling plastic pollution, the UK Government has actively supported infrastructure that locks in plastic production and disposal for decades to come:

- ➔ £600 million of UK public finance directed towards INEOS petrochemical expansion in Europe
- ➔ Approval of 40+ new waste incinerators, encouraging plastic burning rather than reduction
- ➔ Greenlighting new oil and gas fields with existing licences — feeding plastic production

Around 8-10% of global oil demand already goes into plastic production, and that share is growing. Approving new oil projects is not just a climate decision – it's a plastic one too. It's time the UK Government stops funding production and starts investing in our circular economy-based future.

### Hold the polluters to account

For years, governments have relied on voluntary corporate commitments to deliver change. But voluntary commitments are, by design, optional. And the Dirty Dozen have demonstrated that voluntary action will not solve the pollution crisis. Without urgent intervention, the results will be incremental change at best and progress obstruction - with piling pollution - at worst.

**WHAT WE REALLY NEED IS STRONG LAWS WITH ENFORCEABLE TARGETS. IT'S TIME THE UK GOVERNMENT STEP UP, PUT A STOP TO THE DIRTY GREENWASHING AND DELIVER REAL CHANGE.**

### RETURN TO OFFENDER

Scan the QR code to take action against the UK's top polluting brands:



### No more delay

Deposit Return Schemes (DRS) and Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) were first promised nearly a decade ago. But, year after year, their delivery has been delayed, redesigned or diluted as a result of industry lobbying.

Where DRS and pEPR legislation has been implemented properly, pollution falls, recycling improves, and costs shift away from communities and taxpayers. These policies work because they are mandatory, enforceable and designed to change behaviour at scale.

But despite knowing the benefits, the UK government has listened to polluting brands instead of communities and let progress stall. Industry voices – many representing the Dirty Dozen – continue to argue for further delays, exemptions and weakened fees. The UK government must put a stop to this now; it's time to step up and deliver.



# CONCLUSION

The evidence in this report tells a clear story. Plastic pollution in the UK is not driven by consumer behaviour or a lack of awareness.

It's the predictable outcome of a system that allows the world's biggest brands to profit from packaging, primarily single-use plastic, while avoiding responsibility for the damage it causes.

For more than a decade, governments have relied on voluntary corporate commitments to address plastic pollution. These commitments have failed. The same major brands have once again dominated the Dirty Dozen pollution rankings, plastic production continued to rise, and vital policies have been delayed or weakened as a result of industry lobbying.

- THE SOLUTIONS EXIST.
- THE EVIDENCE IS CLEAR.
- THE PLASTIC CRISIS IS NOT INEVITABLE; IT IS A POLITICAL CHOICE.

What is needed now is political courage to finally stand up against the polluters and act in public interest, putting the ocean and communities first.



# WHAT WE'RE CALLING FOR

Surfers Against Sewage is calling for an urgent shift from voluntary pledges to binding action that matches the scale of the crisis. We are calling on Governments across the UK to act urgently, implementing:



## LEGALLY BINDING TARGETS TO CUT PLASTIC PRODUCTION

Governments must set legally binding targets to cut plastic **PRODUCTION** and **CONSUMPTION**.



## TACKLE THE WORST POLLUTING SINGLE-USE PLASTICS

Through the **ENFORCEMENT** of existing legislation and **EXPANSION** of bans government and regulators must tackle the worst polluting single use plastics on UK beaches.



## CREATION OF A WORLD-LEADING CIRCULAR ECONOMY

Governments across the UK must **WORK TOGETHER** to create a UK wide world-leading circular economy. This includes passing legally binding overarching reuse targets and implementing Deposit Return Schemes and Extended Producer Responsibility Schemes which design out waste, hold polluters to account and enable re-use and re-fill.



## A BAN ON TOXIC CHEMICALS

Governments must introduce measures to ban toxic chemicals across the plastics lifecycle (supply chain) including **TOXIC ADDITIVES**, **PFAS**, and **ENDOCRINE DISRUPTING SUBSTANCES** that threaten human health and marine life.

# TAKE ACTION:

## SHARE:

Share the report findings with friends and media, using our social-media toolkit



## SHAME:

Let the brands know we're onto them, and that it's time to put planet before profit.



## CLEAN:

Take part in a Million Mile Clean and help us continue to grow our evidence.



## JOIN:

Join the movement to help free your community from single-use plastic.





# THANK YOU!

This report would not have been possible without each and every dedicated volunteer taking part in the Million Mile Clean last year: rolling up your sleeves, removing harmful plastic from the environment and recording vital data to hold polluters accountable.

2025 saw record-breaking numbers of data submissions, from Lands' End to John O' Groats, Ballycastle to Blyth, and everywhere in between. Every single piece of plastic picked up, and each brand identified, helped to make our case as strong as possible – creating irrefutable evidence to fuel our demands and drive on the fight.

The data collected reflects the growing movement of communities across the UK standing up against plastic and the polluters, with an unwavering commitment to protecting the ocean, nature and all the other wild spaces we love and depend upon.

So, a massive **THANK YOU** to everyone who helped. People power is what will turn the tide on plastic pollution, for good.

For the Ocean,  
The Surfers Against Sewage Team

# APPENDIX

## 1. GLOSSARY OF TERMS

### Circular Economy

An economic system designed to minimise waste and resource extraction by emphasising reuse, refill, repair, redesign, and recycling.

### Designed for recycling

Technology exists (or is anticipated very soon) that would allow packaging to be recycled.

### Downstream

Activities that occur after a product is used, including waste collection, sorting, recycling, disposal, or recovery processes.

### DRS (Deposit Return scheme)

A deposit is paid by consumers (whether businesses or individuals) on packaging, usually beverage containers, which is then repaid when they return the packaging for recycling (or ideally reuse, though that isn't in the UK plan).

### EPR

EPR is a policy approach that makes producers financially responsible for the full waste management costs of the products they place on the market. It is used internationally across many product types, such as textiles and packaging.

### Feedstock

What plastic products are made from. In virgin plastics, this is plastic pellets that are made from fossil fuel residuals, or in some niche cases bio-based oils. For recycled plastic it is plastic shards (sometimes reformed into pellets) that come from reclaimed, sorted, cleaned, and processed plastic items.

### GPT (Global Plastics Treaty)

A legally binding international agreement being negotiated by the United Nations to end plastic pollution. It's intended to address the full lifecycle of plastics, including limiting plastic production, improving product design, and strengthening waste management systems.

### OPRL (On Pack Recycling Label)

A voluntary scheme in the UK to have uniform disposal instructions.

### PCR (Post-Consumer Recycled)

Sustainable materials manufactured from discarded, used, and recycled consumer waste—such as bottles, tubs, and containers collected from household or industrial recycling streams.

### Packaging EPR (pEPR)

In the UK, the packaging version of EPR is referred to as pEPR. This is a specific scheme that requires packaging producers to cover the costs of collecting, sorting and recycling packaging waste. Under recent reforms, these costs are “modulated” - meaning producers pay higher fees for packaging that is hard to recycle, and lower fees for packaging that is easier to recycle.

### Recyclable packaging

Technology is widely implemented that can recycle the packaging.

### Recyclate

The end product of a recycling process, plastic that is ready to be turned into a new product.

### RRC (Reusable, recyclable, or compostable)

An EMF metric for how much of their packaging fits one of these three criteria. Companies will mask their reuse targets by only tracking this grouped metric.

### Upstream

Activities and processes that occur earlier in a product's lifecycle, such as raw material extraction, material production, and packaging design, before the product reaches consumers.

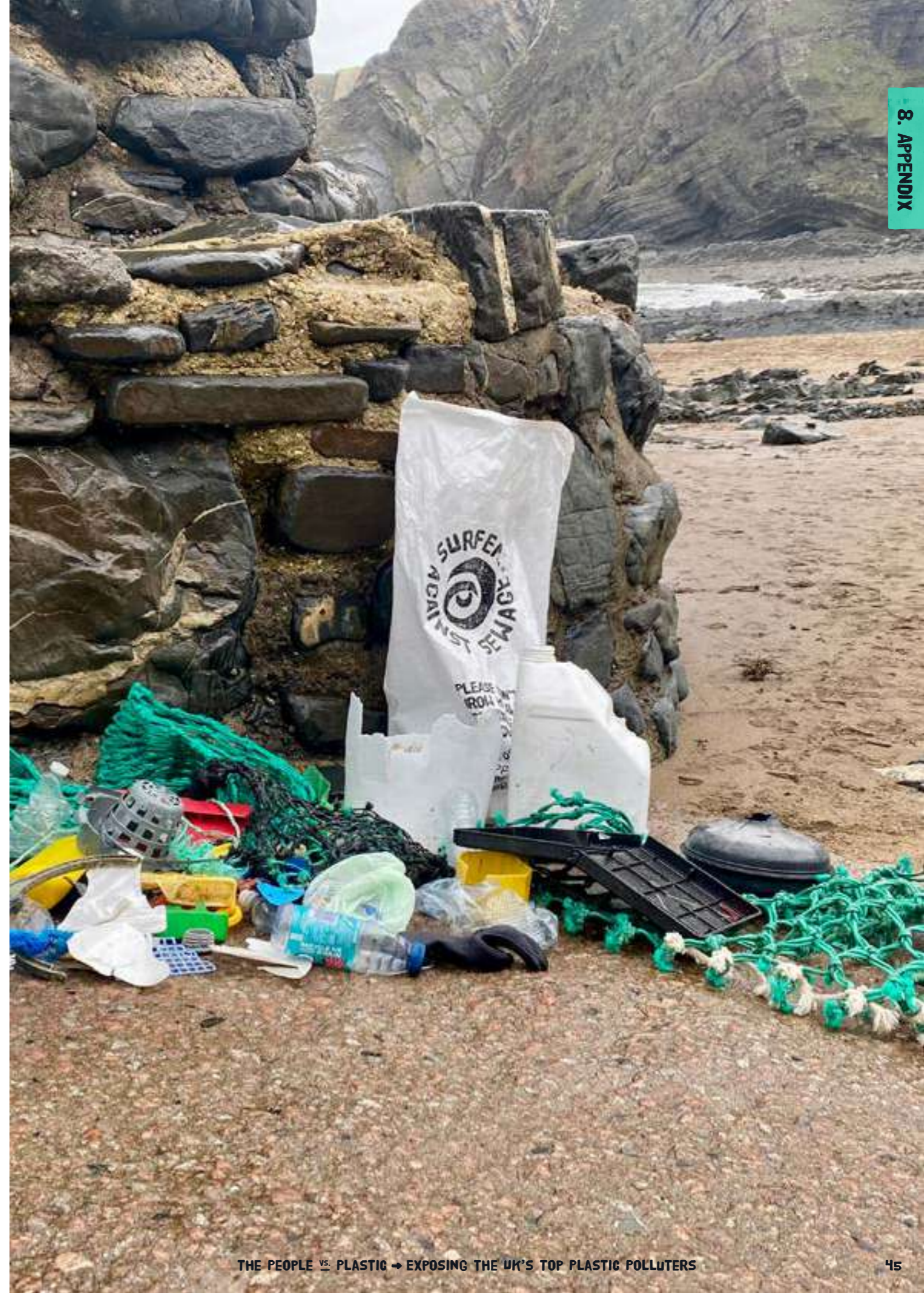
### Virgin Plastics

Plastic produced from newly extracted fossil fuels, rather than recycled materials. Virgin plastics drive most of the industry's carbon emissions and expansion.

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Surfers Against Sewage  
Unit 2, Wheal Kitty Workshops, St Agnes, TR5 0RD

Email: [info@sas.org.uk](mailto:info@sas.org.uk) | Telephone: 01872 553 001 | [www.sas.org.uk](http://www.sas.org.uk)

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