



THE BIG PLASTIC COUNT RESULTS

EVERYDAY
PLASTIC



THE BIG PLASTIC COUNT REVEALS THE SCALE OF THE UK'S BIG PLASTIC PROBLEM

Plastic production is set to triple by 2060, and the UK is still one of the highest producers of plastic waste per person in the world.^{1,2} Plastic is essential for many people to live safely and independently. But the majority of plastic packaging isn't serving that essential purpose. Walk into any supermarket and you'll see the scale of the problem right there on the shelves: almost all of our food and household products are wrapped in plastic packaging. How can we expect to recycle our way out of this crisis when too much plastic is being produced in the first place?

The Big Plastic Count has revealed that only 16% of our plastic waste is actually recycled. The majority (59%) is burned in the UK, and the rest is sent overseas (16%) or to landfill (9%).

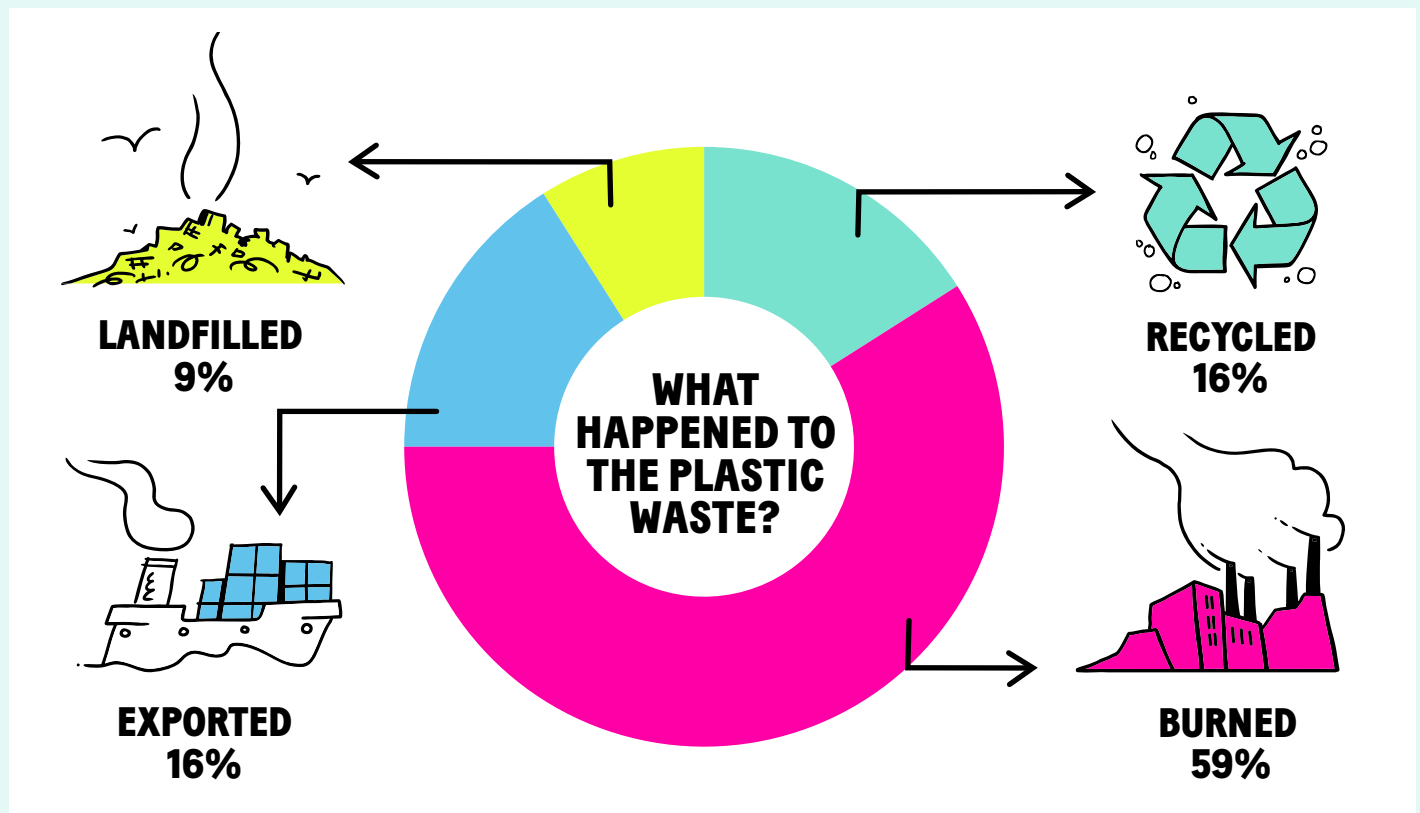
Burning plastic waste is a big problem – it accelerates the climate crisis and pollutes the air. These facilities are also ten times more likely to be built in areas hit hardest by inequality, harming the health and wellbeing of the communities that live there.³

The oil and gas industry is driving up plastic production and locking us into decades of damage. These companies are making huge profits from plastic – while pressuring politicians to protect those profits, even when it harms our communities and our climate.

“IF WE MAKE LESS PLASTIC, WE BURN LESS PLASTIC. IT’S THAT SIMPLE.”

Recycling cannot keep pace with production. Incineration is expanding and communities are paying the price. We can't burn our way out of the plastics crisis.

If we make less plastic, we burn less plastic. It's that simple. The solution starts with cutting plastic production and ending our overreliance on throwaway packaging. If we are serious about climate targets, public health and environmental justice, we must reduce plastic production, instead of continuing to invest in waste management solutions such as recycling and incineration.



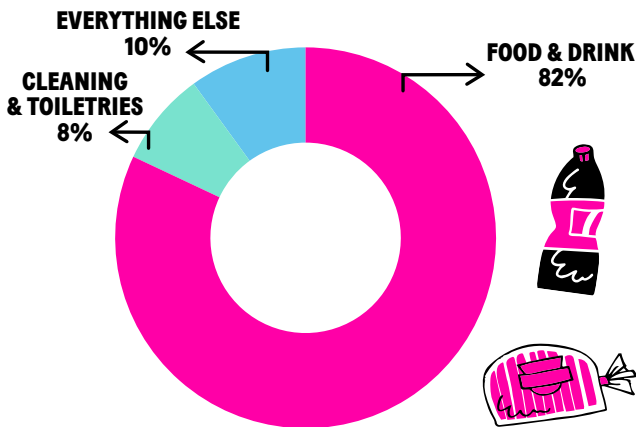
THE BIG PLASTIC COUNT

2026 KEY FINDINGS

In March 2026, over 68,000 people from schools, households, community groups and workplaces across the UK counted their plastic waste for one week as part of the biggest people-powered investigation into plastic waste. Together, they counted over 1.5million pieces of plastic.

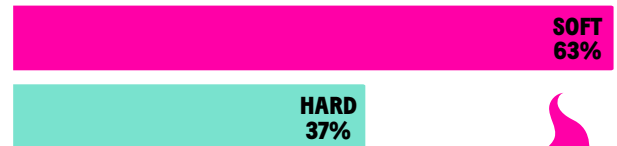
UK HOUSEHOLDS THROW AWAY AN ESTIMATED 82 BILLION PIECES OF PLASTIC EVERY YEAR

82% of household plastic waste comes from food and drink products.

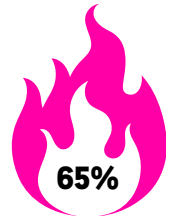


We estimate 13 billion pieces of fruit and veg packaging are thrown away every year.

63% of fruit and veg packaging was soft plastic which is almost impossible to recycle at scale, especially in the UK.



65% of fruit and veg packaging was incinerated instead of recycled.



The most common type of food and drink packaging was plastic from fruit and veg – 16% of the total pieces counted.



93% of The Big Plastic Count participants say they would prefer to buy loose produce if it were available.ⁱ

46% of fruit and veg packaging came from Tesco's and Sainsbury's.ⁱⁱ



WE ARE CALLING ON THE UK GOVERNMENT TO:

1.

Remove plastic packaging from uncut fruit and vegetables by 2030



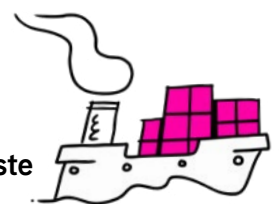
2.

Stop the construction of new waste incinerators immediately



3.

Introduce a phased ban on UK plastic waste exports



REMOVE PLASTIC PACKAGING FROM UNCUT FRUIT AND VEGETABLES BY 2030



FINDINGS

Fruit and veg packaging was the most common type of plastic, accounting for 16% of all of the plastic waste counted. Of this, 63% was film plastic, which is almost impossible to recycle at scale in the UK, and 46% of this packaging came from Tesco and Sainsbury's.ⁱⁱ Based on our findings, The Big Plastic Count estimates that UK households discard 13 billion pieces of fruit and veg packaging each year.

CURRENT SITUATION

Plastic packaging on uncut fruit and vegetables is unnecessary and unpopular. Many items already have their own natural protection, yet are still sold wrapped in plastic that is thrown away almost immediately.

Supermarkets often argue that removing plastic packaging would be difficult because their customers are used to it. But this behaviour has been strategically shaped by retailers over time, often leaving people with little to no choice to buy their fruit and veg wrapped in plastic. This

also drives people to buy greater quantities than they actually need, resulting in surplus food which then has to be thrown away. In fact, 93% of participants say they would prefer to buy loose produce if it were available.ⁱ

Plastic packaging has driven existing retail systems and supply chains – making transport, storage and sales of fruit and veg more standardised and higher volume, by enabling fixed pack sizes. This reflects supermarket logistics and sales strategies more than customer needs. It raises a simple question: who is this packaging really for?

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The UK Plastics Pact has shown how difficult it is to reduce packaging through voluntary action alone. Retailers often say they need a level playing field to act.

We therefore recommend legislation to remove plastic packaging from uncut fruit and veg by 2030.

This would:

- Immediately cut billions of pieces of unnecessary plastic – if apples, bananas and potatoes were sold loose it would cut an estimated 8,800 tonnes of plastic packaging annually.⁴
- Push supermarkets to accelerate the rollout of reuse and refill systems
- Send a clear signal that removal – not recycling – is the priority

It would also allow people to buy only what they need, which would:

- Cut food waste by up to 60,000 tonnes⁵
- Save people an estimated £360 million annually⁶

This is a practical, visible step towards a low-waste economy and a departure from throwaway culture.

ⁱ 93% of The Big Plastic Count participants who responded to the optional survey said they would prefer to buy loose produce if available.

ⁱⁱ Of those who disclosed where they bought their fruit and veg from during Count week, 46% responded Tesco or Sainsbury's.

STOP THE CONSTRUCTION OF NEW WASTE INCINERATORS IMMEDIATELY



FINDINGS

The Big Plastic Count has shown that 59% of the plastic we throw away is burned in UK incinerators, an increase from 46% in 2022.

CURRENT SITUATION

As plastic production increases, incineration has expanded to deal with growing waste. The UK now faces incineration overcapacity – meaning we have more capacity to burn waste than waste available.

Despite this, new incinerators are still being proposed. This risks locking the UK into decades of waste burning, while limiting progress on waste reduction and recycling.

Bringing incineration into the UK Emissions Trading Scheme from 2028 could help curb emissions and discourage burning plastic. But expanding incineration capacity at the same time risks locking in waste and weakening incentives to reduce and recycle plastic.

Incinerators are also ten times more likely to be built in areas facing higher levels of inequality.⁷ This means more pollution and greater health risks for communities already experiencing disadvantage.

Burning plastic:

- Emits large quantities of CO² – around one tonne per tonne burned – directly worsening the climate crisis⁸
- Releases harmful air pollution which affects human health⁹
- Locks the UK into a system that depends on continued plastic production
- Disproportionately harms already disadvantaged communities

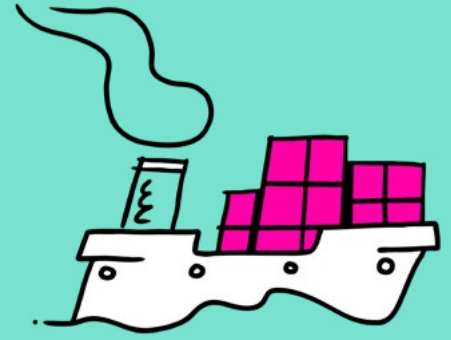
POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The Big Plastic Count is showing that the UK is becoming increasingly reliant on incineration to manage our plastic waste, despite its environmental and health impacts. We are calling for:

- An immediate ban on new waste incineration capacity in England and Northern Ireland
- The Environment Agency to revoke permits for incinerators not yet built and refuse new permits

These are necessary steps that will support the overall reduction of plastic waste, protect our communities, and shift the UK away from a system that relies on burning plastic.

INTRODUCE A PHASED BAN ON UK PLASTIC WASTE EXPORTS



FINDINGS

Only 16% of UK plastic waste is actually recycled. 16% is exported abroad, where its final fate is often unknown.

CURRENT SITUATION

Plastic waste exports have been driven by high waste production, underinvestment in UK recycling infrastructure, and historically weaker controls on exported waste.

But exporting plastic waste causes serious harm. It shifts the burden on to countries that often have less capacity to manage it safely. This leads to pollution, health risks and environmental damage.

This practice is widely recognised as waste colonialism – where richer countries export their waste to poorer nations, avoiding responsibility.¹⁰

Exporting our waste:

- Outsources pollution instead of solving it
- Contributes to environmental harm and illegal waste practices
- Harms communities in other countries
- Allows companies to avoid responsibility

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

There is growing consensus that plastic waste exports should be banned, highlighted by a joint letter to MP Emma Reynolds signed by Everyday Plastic and 53 allied NGOs in October 2025.¹¹

We are calling for a comprehensive, phased reduction in UK plastic waste exports, with a clear plan to end our reliance on them. To achieve this, the UK must introduce:

- Targets to reduce how much plastic is produced and used in the first place
- Investment in UK reuse and refill systems and DRS
- Tighter rules so producers and retailers take responsibility for the plastic they put on the market

This ensures the UK takes responsibility for its own waste and avoids increased reliance on incineration, at home and abroad.

CUTTING PLASTIC PRODUCTION HAS HUGE SOCIAL, ECONOMIC, AND ENVIRONMENTAL BENEFITS.



This is not about better waste management.
It is about preventing waste in the first place.

We want to see the government cut plastic production, protect communities, and deliver real climate leadership.

Reducing plastic production would ease pressure across the whole system – from our climate to our communities.

- Tackles the plastics and climate crises.
- Cuts emissions from plastic production through to waste management
- Protects the health of our communities
- Eases pressure on local authorities.
- Creates a cleaner, fairer future.

The Big Plastic Count reveals the scale of the UK's big plastic problem.

Now the government must act.

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