

Plastic pollution has reached a critical level, with severe implications for climate, biodiversity and human health. The public overwhelmingly supports strong action on plastics. The UN Global Plastics Treaty is a once-in-a-generation opportunity for countries to come together and agree an international, legally-binding instrument to create a lasting solution and cut plastic production globally.

THE SCALE OF THE PROBLEM

- **Global plastic production doubled from 2000 to 2019** to reach 460 million tonnes¹ – more than the combined mass of all living people – **and is set to be triple that by 2050.**
- The plastics industry contributes **between 3 and 4% of global greenhouse gas emissions** – more than aviation. The Center for International Environmental Law estimates plastics could account for **up to 13% of the world's carbon budget by 2050**, if decisive action is not taken.²
- Microplastics have been found at the top of the tallest mountains, at the bottom of the deepest ocean trenches and **in the human body** – with unknown health consequences.
- **Plastic can only be recycled a finite number of times** because it degrades in quality. Burning plastic in incinerators produces air pollution and greenhouse gases.³
- The UN Environment Programme has described the Global Plastics Treaty as **the most important multilateral treaty since the Paris accord in 2015.**⁴

THE RESULTS

As in 2022, there was overwhelming public engagement with The Big Plastic Count, demonstrating the UK public's concern about plastic pollution and determination to make a difference.

More than 100,000 households signed-up to take part. 224,381 people in 77,783 households returned their data, including 28,397 school pupils.

Participants recorded how much of each type of plastic packaging they threw in the bin or recycling, and received information about how their rubbish was dealt with – whether incinerated, dumped in landfill, exported or recycled – based on national data for the different types of plastics they recorded.

Thanks to the efforts of the general public, we can now reveal that:

- Participants counted **4,639,685 pieces of plastic** in a single week.
- On average, each household threw away **60 pieces of plastic packaging in one week**, which amounts to an estimated **3,120 pieces a year.**
- If these findings are assumed to be typical, UK households are using almost **1.7 billion pieces of plastic a week** – equating to around **90 billion pieces a year.**

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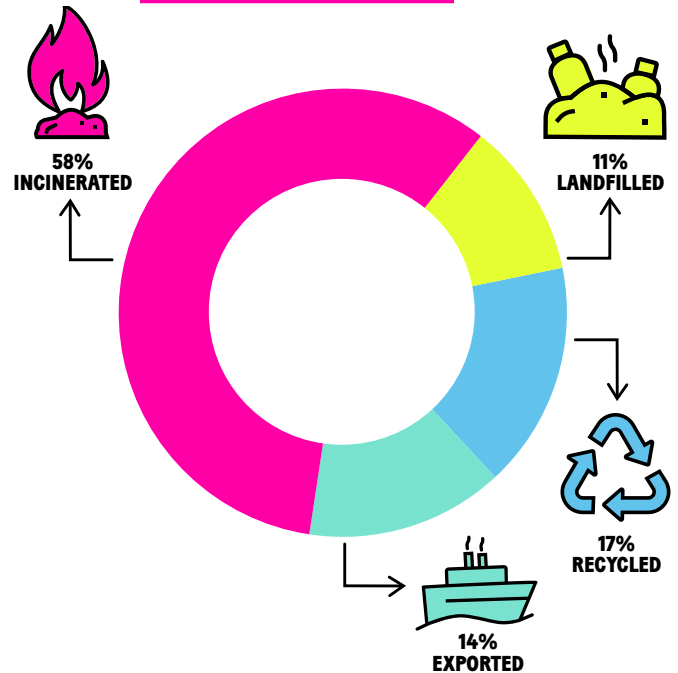
What happened to the pieces of plastic packaging

- Incinerated: **58%**
- Recycled: **17%**
- Exported: **14%**
- Landfill: **11%**

Types of plastic recorded

- Snacks (**699,932 pieces**), followed by fruit and vegetable wrappers (**697,085 pieces**) were the most counted categories of plastic.
- **62%** of the pieces of plastic recorded in the count are either **not collected or poorly collected for recycling by UK local authorities.**

Over half of UK plastic waste is being incinerated – up from 46% when we did the count in 2022.⁵ This releases toxic gases and other pollutants, as well as high levels of greenhouse gases. Incinerators are three times more likely to be built in deprived neighbourhoods,⁶ where residents are disproportionately people of colour.



PLASTICS REMAIN A KEY ISSUE FOR VOTERS

- **75% of voters** think that a Prime Minister who supports the UN Global Plastic Treaty to end single-use plastic portrays strong leadership.⁷
- **74% of UK residents** agree that to stop plastic pollution, we need to cut plastic production.⁸
- The UK public is **more concerned about the threat to society posed by plastic pollution** than the coronavirus pandemic or future pandemics, terrorism, economic collapse, natural disasters, and artificial intelligence. Plastic-related issues top the list of environmental problems that the UK public wants to tackle (plastic in the ocean is number one, 'amount produced' is second).⁹



Cross-party support for plastic production reduction

Ed Miliband, Theresa May and a range of cross-party MPs committed to reduce plastic production at a Big Plastic Count event in the House of Commons in 2022

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THE GLOBAL PLASTICS TREATY IS OUR LAST CHANCE TO SOLVE THE PLASTICS CRISIS

This year, countries have the chance to secure a landmark Treaty to end plastic pollution, with negotiations scheduled to finish in December 2024.

Such an agreement must address the multidimensional nature of plastic pollution, but the most important requirement is to stop the problem at source. The government should call for a strong, legally-binding global target to cut plastic production by 75% by 2040 – the minimum required to keep global warming to 1.5 degrees. Negotiations on production cuts are at a critical stage and countries like the UK need to show leadership on the world stage to secure a global, legally binding and ambitious target.

We call on the UK government to raise its ambition levels and publicly support this global target ahead of the next round of talks at the end of April. This is why we are seeking to rally as much public and parliamentary support now.

The Treaty must address other vital areas including:

- Restrictions on the most harmful polymers, chemicals and single use plastics
- Prioritisation of reuse and refill over recycling
- A just transition to sustainable livelihoods across the plastics supply chain
- Agreeing a dedicated multilateral fund.

UK DOMESTIC POLICY

The UK should match leadership on the international stage with domestic policy ambition. That means implementing the Deposit Return Scheme that was announced in 2018, as well as securing important domestic waste reforms such as Extended Producer Responsibility and a ban on waste exports to non-OECD countries (although this should be extended to OECD countries too). The UK should also reverse its decision to provide a £600 million export finance guarantee to INEOS for Project One – the largest petrochemical plant ever to be built in Europe, bringing US-scale plastics production to this continent.

PLEDGE YOUR SUPPORT

We are asking MPs of all parties to pledge their support for the campaign. Please email: help@thebigplasticcount.com with the words: 'I support a strong global target to cut plastic production' and we will add your name to the pledge. We are grateful for your support.



- 1 OECD, 'Plastic pollution is growing relentlessly as waste management and recycling fall short', 2022: oecd.org/environment/plastic-pollution-is-growing-relentlessly-as-waste-management-and-recycling-fall-short.htm
- 2 Center for International Environmental Law, 'Plastic & Climate: The Hidden Costs of a Plastic Planet', May 2019: ciel.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/Plastic-and-Climate-FINAL-2019.pdf
- 3 ClientEarth, 'Greenhouse Gas and Air Quality Impacts of Incineration and Landfill', 2021: clientearth.org/latest/documents/greenhouse-gas-and-air-quality-impacts-of-incineration-and-landfill/
- 4 Karen McVeigh, The Guardian. 'Countries meet in Kenya to thrash out global plastic pollution treaty', November 2023: theguardian.com/environment/2023/nov/12/countries-meeting-nairobi-kenya-global-plastic-pollution-treaty
- 5 This figure is based on the total number of plastic pieces that were counted, not the weight.

- 6 Unearthed. 'UK waste incinerators three times more likely to be in poorer areas,' 2020: unearthed.greenpeace.org/2020/07/31/waste-incinerators-deprivation-map-recycling/
- 7 Greenpeace UK. 'How will climate influence the next election? New poll shows what the public really think', September 2023: greenpeace.org.uk/resources/climate-opinion-poll/
- 8 Greenpeace International. 'People vs. Plastic: Global support for a strong plastics treaty,' 2024: greenpeace.org/static/planet4-international-stateless/2024/04/ea6997cd-survey-results-global-plastics-treaty.pdf
- 9 University of Birmingham. 'Plastics not a priority for politicians but are for the public, says new research', February 2024: birmingham.ac.uk/news/2024/plastics-not-a-priority-for-politicians-but-are-for-the-public-says-new-research