



Department  
for Environment  
Food & Rural Affairs

# One year review of the impact of the plastic straw restrictions

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# Executive summary

In October 2020 Defra introduced restrictions on the supply to the end user of single-use plastic straws<sup>1</sup>. The restrictions were introduced with a series of exemptions to ensure those who require plastic straws for medical or accessibility purposes can still access them. The primary aim of the restrictions is to reduce pollution caused by littered plastic straws, to help protect and improve the quality of the environment and reduce harm to marine life.

This report carried out by Defra precedes the full post implementation review (PIR), which will be published in 2025, five years following the restrictions' implementation. The report provides a review one year on from the introduction of the restrictions, to examine whether the exemptions are working in practice and how the restrictions have impacted those with disabilities.

The methodology employed stakeholder engagement with hospitality businesses, and charities and organisations representing people with disabilities.

Many respondents who require plastic straws say they have found suitable reusable alternatives. Of those who said they still require plastic straws for medical or accessibility reasons, some were unaware of the exemptions in place surrounding the plastic straws restrictions. For example, they were unsure where they could purchase them. No revisions to the policy are required however there should be further effort to ensure those who those who require access to plastic straws for medical or accessibility reasons are informed of the exemptions in place.

Some respondents mentioned they are switching to straws made from other materials, including paper. It is recommended that this substitution to straws made from other materials is explored further in the full PIR to quantify the impact of this and better understand what they are composed of, how they are disposed, and what their environmental impact is.

## Introduction

On 1<sup>st</sup> October 2020, Defra implemented restrictions on the supply to the end user of single-use plastic straws. It is recognised that some individuals require plastic straws to eat and

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<sup>1</sup> [Straws, cotton buds and drink stirrers ban: rules for businesses in England](#)

drink, particularly due to medical or accessibility needs. The following exemptions are, therefore, in place to ensure those who need them can still access plastic straws:

- Registered pharmacies can supply single-use plastic straws, providing they are not openly displayed or advertised.
- Catering establishments can supply single-use plastic straws with food and drink for immediate consumption, providing they are kept out of sight of customers and not offered to customers unless they request them.
- Single-use plastic straws can be supplied for use as a medical device or for medical purposes, including preventative medicine, medical diagnosis, medical research, and providing medical care and treatment.
- Care homes, schools, premises used for early years provision, and prisons or other places of detention can supply single-use plastic straws.
- Single-use plastic straws used as packaging can be supplied (for example, straws used to dispense medicine).

## Policy objectives of the plastic straw restrictions

Plastic straws are typically only used once, and most are not recycled as they are difficult to segregate and clean and can easily fall between recycling machinery due being small and light weight. Some plastic straws are also littered. Many will be collected, for example, via street cleansing that imposes clean-up costs. Those not cleaned up pollute the land and marine environment, posing a threat to wildlife. Littered plastic straws also have negative wellbeing impacts on those who value pristine land and marine environments.

The government aims to ensure that straws sold in England are made of less environmentally harmful materials that decompose more quickly and have lower life cycle impacts on the environment. It is predicted that restricting the supply of plastic straws to the end user will improve the quality of the environment, reduce harm to marine life and increase consumer awareness of the environmental harms of incorrectly disposing of drinking straws. The restrictions form part of the government's Resources and Waste Strategy<sup>2</sup>, which commits to "ban plastic products where there is a clear case for it and alternatives exist". The restrictions also form part of the 25 Year Environment Plan<sup>3</sup>, which commits to tackling plastic pollution.

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<sup>2</sup> [Resources and Waste Strategy for England](#)

<sup>3</sup> [25 Year Environment Plan](#)

## Objectives of the review

This report carried out by Defra precedes the full post implementation review (PIR), which will be published in 2025, five years following the restrictions' implementation.

In addition to the full PIR, Defra made a commitment to review the impact of the ban and its impact on those with disabilities one year after implementation to inform whether the policy should be revised. This report, carried out by Defra, provides a review one year since the restrictions were introduced and aims to explore:

1. Whether the exemptions surrounding the restrictions are working in practice.
2. How the restrictions have impacted those with disabilities.

At the time of producing the report, there was no suitable data available that would allow us to assess the effectiveness in cutting the number of straws, meaning this could not be explored in the present review. The full post implementation review (PIR), which will be published in 2025, should therefore seek to analyse a wide range of data, such as from beach cleans, litter surveys and other relevant, available sources, to examine the impact of the restrictions on plastic straw litter.

## Evidence informing the review

The following evidence informs the review:

- Stakeholder engagement with five disability related charities and organisations on the impact of the plastic straw restrictions on those who require access to them for medical or accessibility reasons, and whether the exemptions are working in practice.
- Stakeholder engagement with three hospitality establishments on the impact of the plastic straw restrictions on businesses.

## Method & Results

### Stakeholder engagement with charities and organisations representing people with disabilities

We contacted several charities and organisations representing people with accessibility needs and disabilities, to seek the views and experiences of their members surrounding the plastic straw restrictions. We provided each charity and organisation with a description of the plastic straw restrictions and the exemptions in place. Representatives then shared this information with their members and/or the carers of their members, either in a meeting, a newsletter or an email. Representatives asked those who felt they had been impacted by

the plastic straw restrictions to answer some questions we provided them with. They were asked how they thought the exemptions were working in practice, and how (if applicable) they found the experience of requesting a plastic straw in a hospitality venue or pharmacy. They were also asked whether, in circumstances where plastic straws are unavailable, they had access to alternative straws, and if so, what type and how they found using them. The representatives of the charities and organisations then shared these responses (or a summary of them) with Defra.

We received responses from five charities and organisations:

- Merton Centre for Independent Living.
- Spinal Injuries Association.
- Association for Real Change England (ARC).
- Achalasia Action.
- The Voluntary Organisations Disability Group.

The following charities and organisations were contacted but did not, or were unable to, provide a response: Dementia UK, Stroke Association UK, Motor Neurone Disease Association UK, Multiple Sclerosis Society, The Brain Charity, Parkinson's UK, My Aware, Cleft Lip and Palate Association, Scleroderma and Raynaud's UK, Mouth Cancer Foundation, and Scope.

In most cases, the organisations and charities we engaged with did not raise any concerns. Of the charities whose members did comment, most explained that they purchase straws (either reusable or plastic) which they use at home and when visiting hospitality venues, and thus they are not reliant on requesting plastic straws from staff in these situations. Some individuals appeared to be unaware of the exemptions in place and did not know they can purchase plastic straws from pharmacies. For example, one individual commented that they had stocked up on plastic straws before the restrictions but did not know where they would be able to buy more once they had run out.

There were a range of responses regarding individuals' experiences with alternatives to plastic straws. Respondents explained that hospitality venues often offer paper straws as a replacement for plastic straws, but few find these to be sufficient as they disintegrate quickly in drinks and are not durable or flexible enough to meet their needs. Although some individuals use reusable straws (including straws made from metal, bamboo, neoprene, glass, and other materials), many still require single use plastic straws. This is because their flexibility and lack of heat retention means they are often the safest and most accessible option.

It should be noted that this data consists of the views of a limited number of charities and may not accurately reflect all experiences of all individuals with disabilities or accessibility needs. The full PIR should seek to further engage with charities that represent individuals with a range of accessibility needs and disabilities, and especially those not represented in this review.

## Stakeholder engagement with trade bodies and businesses in the hospitality sector

We contacted several representatives from trade bodies and businesses in the hospitality sector to ask about the impact of the plastic straw restrictions. We shared a description of the plastic straw restrictions and the exemptions in place with representatives and asked them to respond to several questions: Firstly, we asked whether they were aware of the exemptions described. Secondly, we asked whether plastic straw restrictions were working in practice (i.e., whether staff knew to keep plastic straws out of sight in their venues and only offer them to those who request them, without asking for proof of a disability or medical condition). Thirdly, we asked whether they still stock straws, and if so, what material these are made from. Finally, we asked whether there have been any costs or challenges since the restrictions came into force (for example, due to alternatives to plastic straws being more expensive).

We received responses from three businesses:

- Costa Coffee
- Young & Co Brewery
- General Commercial Management at the University of Warwick

The following trade bodies and businesses were contacted but did not, or were unable to, provide a response: Stonegate, NewRiver, Trust Inns, Loungers Ltd, Amber Taverns, KFC, Pizza Hut, Dominoes, McDonalds, Subway, The Restaurant Group, Starbucks, Liberation Group, JD Wetherspoons, Mitchell's and Butlers, and Green King.

All businesses reported staff were aware of the plastic straw restrictions and the exemptions in place and understand how to comply with the exemptions. It was reported that the guidance surrounding the restrictions is being followed as it should, with all keeping a small number of plastic straws out of sight of customers, for those who might request one for medical or accessibility reasons. As anticipated, the businesses we engaged with have replaced plastic straws with paper straws. Notably, since the restrictions were introduced, businesses are typically purchasing fewer straws overall due reduced customer demand for them. This may not, however, be the case for all businesses, with Costa explaining that the number of straws they order fluctuates based on seasonal campaigns. Some businesses explained that paper straws are more expensive than plastic straws (although cost can vary depending on colour, pattern, etc.). There were, however, no complaints regarding this price



difference, and as the 2018 consultation<sup>4</sup> showed, the majority (81%) of businesses support the plastic straw restrictions.

It should be noted that this data consists of the views of only a small number of businesses and may not accurately reflect all experiences in the sector. The full PIR should, therefore, seek to engage with a wider number of trade bodies and businesses to ensure their feedback is represented.

## Conclusion

Overall, the review finds some evidence of the exemptions working in practice, with staff in hospitality businesses being aware of the restrictions, the exemptions in place, and how to apply these. Some businesses noted a reduced demand for straws from consumers and had substituted to straws of other materials. Those consulted who require straws for medical or accessibility reasons, do not report to have been negatively impacted by its introduction. Most individuals who require straws purchase their own reusable or plastic straws and use these at all times, including in hospitality settings. There are, however, some individuals who appear to be unaware of the exemptions in place allowing pharmacies to supply and sell plastic straws.

## Recommendations

This review concludes that, at present, there does not need to be any further changes to the regulation and exemptions regarding the restrictions on the supply of plastic straws to the end user. It is recommended that effort is made to ensure those who require straws for medical or accessibility reasons are aware of the exemptions in place allowing the provision of plastic straws to those in need and for pharmacies to supply and sell. This could be facilitated health and social care providers and institutions, who could share information regarding the exemptions with individuals who are likely to require plastic straws to drink. Additionally, Defra could use their communications platform to provide more information on the exemptions in place.

Importantly, the present review is preliminary and provides limited data only one-year after the introduction of the ban. For this reason, it is not yet possible to draw any firm conclusions regarding the impact of the restrictions. As well as further reviewing each of the areas

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<sup>4</sup> [Consultation on proposals to ban the distribution and/or sale of plastic straws, plastic-stemmed cotton buds and plastic drink stirrers in England](#)

covered in this report, the full PIR should explore several issues that were beyond the scope of this review.

Firstly, due to the lack of suitable available data, it was not possible to examine whether the restrictions have impacted the amount of plastic straw litter. The full PIR must, therefore, utilise all available, relevant evidence, including beach clean and litter survey data, to thoroughly assess this.

Secondly, some stakeholders mentioned they had substituted plastic straws to straws of other materials. Considering this, it is recommended that we identify exactly what other materials straws are composed of and what their environmental impact is, including whether the materials could be harmful to animal and/or human health when littered. It is also important to identify how these are typically dealt with during waste management. It is assumed that most will be incinerated, but this remains unconfirmed.

Thirdly, the present review did not explore the enforcement of these restrictions. Local authorities are responsible for enforcing the plastic straws restrictions through Trading Standards. The present review found that the restrictions appear to be working in practice, however, it did not specifically examine how the restrictions are being enforced. This is something that could be considered in the full PIR.

Finally, one of the policy objectives of the plastic straw restrictions was to increase consumer awareness of the environmental harms of incorrectly disposing of drinking straws. It is currently unclear whether consumer awareness has changed since the restrictions were introduced. It is recommended that the full PIR, therefore, explores consumers' perceptions around disposing of drinking straws (both paper and plastic) and identifies whether educational and/or behavioural interventions are required.