

## Taking Action on Plastic Waste in Your Workplace

### Action on plastic waste – what can you do in your workplace?

Over the last seventy years, an estimated 8.3 billion tonnes of plastic has been produced globally, and existing recycling systems are unable to cope with the growing volume of plastic waste. US academics have estimated that of all the plastic waste that has been produced in the last seventy years around the world, less than 10% has been recycled, around 12% has been incinerated, while almost 80% has been dumped in landfills or has leaked into the natural environment.<sup>1</sup>

The accumulation of plastic waste in the world's oceans has garnered particular public attention, thanks in part to recent documentaries like the BBC's *Blue Planet II*, which highlighted the devastating impact that plastic waste is having on marine ecosystems. According to some estimates, by 2050 there will be more plastic than fish in the world's oceans.<sup>2</sup> Urgent action is therefore required to drastically improve plastics recycling, and, crucially, to reduce demand for plastics, especially in areas like food and drink packaging.

A recent consultation on measures to reduce plastic waste by the Treasury garnered more than 160,000 public responses, with overwhelming support for tough action. Plastic waste pollution is therefore an issue which many people in your workplace will be aware of and want to see action on, providing an excellent opportunity for environmental reps to educate, engage, and empower co-workers to take action. With UK businesses generating ten times more waste than UK households, at an estimated cost to businesses of £15 billion annually, there is also a strong business case for action on waste.

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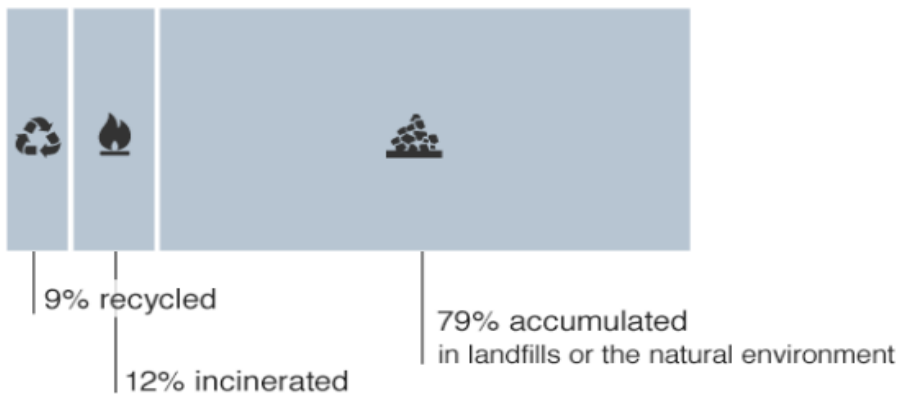
<sup>1</sup> <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/science-environment-42264788>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-global-environment-oceans-waste/plastic-to-outweigh-fish-in-the-sea-if-waste-keeps-flowing-idUSKBN18Z1A8>

## How much plastic is there?



As of 2015, approximately **6.3bn tonnes** of plastic waste had been generated



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If current production and waste management trends continue, roughly **12bn tonnes** of plastic waste will be in landfills or the natural environment by 2050.

Source: Science Magazine

BBC

If you are looking for ways to take action on plastic waste, it may be useful to think about how to advance the 'reduce, reuse, recycle' ethos in your workplace:

- **Reduce:** there will be lots of potential ways to reduce plastics use at your workplace. This can range from ensuring that water fountains are available, to discourage bottled water use (38.5 million plastic bottles are used every day in the UK), to encouraging your canteen to switch away from 'single use' plastics like cutlery and plastic cups. If appropriate to your worksite, you could consider encouraging your employer to sign up to the 'Refill' campaign to provide free tap water refilling facilities to customers and members of the public ([www.refill.org.uk](http://www.refill.org.uk)).
- **Reuse:** up to 5 billion disposable coffee cups are used in the UK every year according to some estimates, whilst fewer than 1 in 400 are recycled, generating 30,000 tonnes of plastic waste. Encouraging co-workers to buy their morning

coffee in a reusable travel mug, is one concrete way to raise awareness about this issue, and if your worksite has a café check whether they offer a discount if you bring your own cup.

- **Recycle:** many workplaces already provide recycling facilities, but if your employer does not, this is an easy first step to tackling plastic waste. Even if facilities exist, it is important to make sure they are accessible and convenient to use, and that staff understand what items can be recycled and where to put them.

These steps are just the starting point though. Employers should be encouraged to work with staff to undertake a thorough environmental audit to identify opportunities to reduce waste, and to reuse and recycle wherever possible. To be effective, this needs to be accompanied by efforts to educate and engage staff in waste reduction and recycling initiatives.

### **Links and resources**

TUC guide to Greening Your Workplace - <https://www.tuc.org.uk/research-analysis/reports/greening-workplace-%E2%80%93-environmental-rights-work>

Recycling at work guide - <https://www.recyclenow.com/recycling-knowledge/getting-started/recycling-at-work>

Friends of the Earth guide to going plastic-free at work - <https://friendsoftheearth.uk/plastics/plasticfree-work>

Refill campaign to reduce plastic water bottle waste - <https://www.refill.org.uk/>

Seven charts that explain the plastic pollution problem - <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/science-environment-42264788>

More on the threat to marine ecosystems from plastics - <https://plasticoceans.org/>

Tips for using less plastic (US-focused but still useful) - <http://www.greeneducationfoundation.org/nationalgreenweeksub/waste-reduction-tips/tips-to-use-less-plastic.html>

### **What is Prospect's environment network?**

Prospect's environment network exists to help promote environmental and sustainable development policies in the workplace. The network currently comprises hundreds of Prospect members across the country, working in a wide variety of industries from defence to the heritage sector, and who are interested in environmental issues and in promoting workplace sustainability.