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2017 was the year that ocean plastics, and the corresponding damage they cause, entered mainstream public consciousness. Approximately eight billion tonnes of plastic has been produced since its invention in 1907, of which five billion supposedly remain in the environment¹. Although the problem had been growing for years, almost one year ago, it suddenly became a key focal point across society.

Arguably one of the most significant factors in this sudden spike in awareness was the globally-renowned Blue Planet II, the BBC's decade-on follow up to the original Blue Planet series which examined a plethora of marine life and mankind's impact on the world's oceans. The show did not hold back, emotionally highlighting the negative impacts ocean plastics have, through images of dead and dying marine life. The mini-series, broadcast across countries in Europe, Asia and later the US, culminated with the ever-profound Sir David Attenborough posing: "*Surely we have a responsibility to care for our blue planet. The future of humanity, and indeed all life on earth, now depends on us.*"²

This call for action is a response to the significant damage humanity is causing. It's estimated that over eight million tonnes of plastics are dumped into the sea every year, which subsequently break down into smaller fragments – toxic microplastics which are ingested by fish and birds and ultimately cause death³. If no action is taken, it's estimated that there will be 1 tonne of plastic for every 3 tonnes of fish in the ocean by 2025, and by 2050, plastic will exceed fish in the ocean by weight⁴.

So, with the problem already having emerged on an epic scale and it being seemingly too late to counter, what's next?

An issue for both business and government

¹ IBM Institute for Business Value: What's next for plastic? (2018) ([source](#))

² BBC Video: A message from Sir David Attenborough – Blue Planet II: Episode 7 ([source](#))

³ Radio Times article by Sir David Attenborough (2018) ([source](#))

⁴ The New Plastics Economy, Ellen MacArthur Foundation (2016)

Ocean plastics pose an issue to business for several reasons. Many consumers see producers and retailers as fundamentally responsible for the plastics problem, and that plastics are impossible to avoid for consumers due to most product packaging being plastic-based – almost a “wouldn’t buy it but it’s the only thing there” mentality. However, the counter argument for businesses here is age-old supply and demand – “we wouldn’t sell it if they didn’t want it”. Regardless of blame, the behaviour businesses exhibit towards plastics is coming under increased examination. As more and more single-use plastics become scrutinised by the public, so do the companies that use them.

Take the coffee cup debate, for example. Coffee cups are difficult to recycle due to their dual layer and mix of materials. An estimated seven million disposable coffee cups are thrown away in the UK every day⁵. The infrastructure provided by local governments cannot support recycling of these items yet and the technology to do so is not widespread enough to make collection and sorting a lucrative exercise. As such, these items end up in abundance in landfill or oceans.

A selection of businesses from across the value chain are starting to act. On the retail side, major coffee brands have made moves following public criticism. Starbucks – who are allegedly responsible for 1% of all paper and plastic cups distributed globally per year, equating to roughly 6 billion cups – is investing to develop an entirely recyclable and compostable disposable coffee cup to introduce into stores within the next three years⁶. This followed a trial where customers received a 25p discount for bringing in their own reusable cup. Pret a Manger ran a similar scheme but offered a 50p deduction. Although Starbucks have come under criticism from environmentalists for cumbersome action – the three years to get the new cup to market – it is a clear step in the right direction. Costa Coffee have also announced plans to embark on a “cup recycling revolution” and are aiming to recycle 500 million coffee cups a year – even those of its competitors – by accepting used cups in store and encouraging waste collection firms, such as SUEZ⁷, to collect them by paying a supplement⁸.

Others from across the value chain are also taking matters into their own hands. Waste manager Veolia offer a nationwide Coffee Cup Recycling service which reduces waste to landfill and improves commercial businesses’ green credentials. The commitment is to recycle 120 million coffee cups in

⁵ Hubbub Foundation (2018) ([source](#))

⁶ iNews: Starbucks to wake up and smell the coffee after announcing plans to create the world’s first 100% recyclable cup (2018) ([source](#))

⁷ SUEZ: SUEZ to help costs recycle 500 million coffee cups a year under new scheme (2018) ([source](#))

⁸ BBC News: Costa Coffee vows ‘cup recycling revolution’ (2018) ([source](#))

2019⁹ by working with key retailers, including Costa and Starbucks. Meanwhile, packaging and paper company DS Smith has claimed that all coffee cup waste could be eradicated and that it could recycle every single of the 2.5 billion disposable cups thrown away every year¹⁰. This followed a trial initiative where DS Smith proved it had 50% more capacity to recycle coffee cup waste than is created annually in the UK¹¹.

In addition to keeping up with business innovation, addressing the plastics issue is crucial for the UK Government because of mounting public pressure. HM Treasury's recent report – 'Tackling the plastics problem: summary of responses to the call to evidence' received the largest level of responses in the Treasury's history – 162,000. With such large-scale interest from consumers and businesses alike, the government cannot be seen to lag. Reputation is on the line. The importance of addressing the issue is further compounded by the fact that it's also getting harder to physically export the problem. Most notably, China¹² and Thailand¹³ have both implemented bans on importing waste from foreign countries. A handful of other Southeast Asian nations have done the same or are considering doing so.

So, not only does not proactively addressing your approach to plastics pose a serious reputational risk, it also leads to missed commercial opportunities. Not making the first move means consumers will make it for you. Onus is on businesses and government to stay ahead of consumer trends and to make sustainable investments in enhanced process and technology. Not only will this solve the reputational issue, it will increase efficiency, reduce waste and safeguard profit in the long run.

What else is being done?

In addition to tackling coffee cup waste, many businesses are taking the lead on other aspects of their approach to plastics. Over 40 companies, representing over 80% of plastic packaging sold in UK supermarkets, have signed up to the UK Plastics Pact (including Coca-Cola, Asda, P&G and M&S)¹⁴. This pact is led by Waste & Resources Action Programme ([WRAP](#)); a collaborative initiative between

⁹ Edie: Veolia to recycle 120 million coffee cups in 2019 (2018) ([source](#))

¹⁰ DS Smith: British-based packaging company cracks the coffee cup recycling challenge (2018) ([source](#))

¹¹ The Grocer: DS Smith makes 100% UK coffee cup recycling claim (2018) ([source](#))

¹² Reuters: China bans imports of 16 more scrap, waste products from end-2018 ([source](#))

¹³ Resource Recycling: Thailand bans scrap plastic imports ([source](#))

¹⁴ BBC News: Companies sign up to pledge to cut plastic pollution (2018) ([source](#))

brands, retailers, producers, recyclers, NGOs, government bodies and citizens; which aims to embed circular economy principles and move to a sustainable, resource-efficient economy.

There is a growing pool of financial capital becoming available to catalyse change in business. Perhaps most publicly, the UK Government announced a £20m allocation to plastics innovation in the Spring Statement 2018. The Plastic Research Innovation Fund (PRIF) was launched, which included £2m for a UK Circular Plastics Network, £8m to creative research into plastics and £10m for business-led R&D aimed at catalysing innovation¹⁵.

The UK Government are also taking legislative action. Theresa May has already committed to extending the remit of the plastic bag charge, which has now been in effect for nearly three years. The 5p charge on single-use bags could now be extended to 10p with the scheme being extended to all retailers (currently only retailers employing more than 250 people are required to take part)¹⁶. More information on the other ways the government will tackle the plastics issue is expected later this year. Whilst the Autumn Budget 2018 will provide an update on which policy options the UK Government wishes to pursue, the new Waste & Resource Strategy will explain how ambitions from the Clean Growth Strategy, Industrial Strategy and 25 Year Environment plan will be achieved, and how the government will deliver its 'doubling resource productivity' and 'zero avoidable waste by 2050' goals.

What does the future hold?

Microplastics have been rapidly rising in public consciousness for the past several years. Whether they are primary (released into the environment as small particulates) or secondary (degrade from larger items released into the environment) in nature, their potential to disrupt marine life is being realised in greater and greater detail.

Although plastics producers are subject to wide-ranging rules around the storage, handling, generation, transportation, disposal and remediation of their product, market pressures are already pointing towards a mixture of **new and amended regulation**. In addition to the plastic bag tax, HM Treasury's recent report on 'Tackling the plastics problem' highlighted a variety of **single-use items** that respondents thought should be specifically considered. In addition to committing to consulting on

¹⁵ HM Treasury: Tackling the plastic problem – summary of responses to the call for evidence (2018)

¹⁶ Independent: Plastic bag charge to rise to 10p and be extended to every shop (2018) ([source](#))

bans for plastic-stemmed cotton buds, plastic coffee stirrers and plastic straws, the report highlighted a range of single-use plastic items that respondents thought taxes and charges were potentially appropriate for. The four most commonly-referenced were¹⁷:

- Single-use cutlery (including plates and tableware)
- Single-use food packaging (such as takeaway packaging)
- Single-use cups and lids (including for coffee, soft drinks, ice cream, porridge and cereal, and soup)
- Sauce sachets

We expect to see **emerging technologies bringing new commercial opportunities** for both the production and disposal sides of the industry, potentially catalysed in the UK by the Government's allocation of funding to plastics. Whilst some innovators are focused on developing new polymers in more environmentally-friendly ways, others are focused on improving 'end-of-life' options. New technologies with superior environmental qualities – such as enhanced recyclability and compostability, or recycling facilities which adopt new treatment methods – will support consumers and businesses by increasing the feasibility of plastic waste avoidance across the value chain.

However, one key aspect of this debate which needs to be addressed in the near future is **infrastructure around plastic recycling**. Currently, it does not sufficiently deal with the problem. We at Sancroft hope to see developed infrastructures which deal with the issue consistently across the UK and make it easier to properly recycle plastic waste.

How can Sancroft help your company?

Sancroft works with a range of key plastics players, including trade associations, manufacturers, retailers and wholesalers. Sancroft's commercial experience is complemented by knowledge of relevant legislation, allowing for a clear understanding of the current state and direction of the plastics industry. By providing consultancy services and forming strategic partnerships, Sancroft is able to contribute to discussions on, among other things, challenges concerning resource use and waste management, high level policy, responding to changes in legislation, and stakeholder engagement.

¹⁷ Other items commonly referenced included plastics relating to chewing gum, cigarettes, tyres, packets (e.g. crisps, sweets, confectionary and pet food), pots/tubs/trays, bottles (including drinks, toiletries and cleaning products), 4 and 6 pack yokes (used to hold cans together), balloons and balloon sticks, plastic strapping, single-use plastic toys and merchandise, fruit netting, cling film and plastic wrap, fishing gear, and agricultural wrap.

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One year on from Blue Planet II: What's changed for plastics?

We can help you:

- Evaluate position – understand the plastics landscape and where your business sits
- Identify actions – determine what steps can be taken to future-proof your business
- Voice approach – respond to relevant consultations and communicate progress to stakeholders