

Briefing paper on the Global Plastics Treaty September 2024



In 2022, the UN resolved to develop a Global Plastic Treaty by 2025 to end plastic pollution. Since then, countries from around the world have been meeting to negotiate the terms of the treaty and the final meeting is due to happen in Busan, Republic of Korea from 25th November to 1st December 2024. The world's first ever global plastics pollution treaty is a unique opportunity to change the way this harmful material is used for good, and Scotland can play an important role if it acts now.

What's the problem with plastic?

The science is clear: plastic is damaging the planet and our health, and these impacts will worsen if production continues to increase. [99% of plastics are made from fossil fuels](#) and plastic production is fuelling climate breakdown. If left uncontrolled, it will consume [up to one-third](#) of the remaining Paris Agreement carbon budget by 2050, surpassing the energy and transportation sectors.

Exposure to plastics is harming our health. [The quantity of microplastics found in brain samples](#) from 2024 is nearly double that of samples from 2016. More than [13,000 chemicals are associated with plastic production](#), many of which are known to be hazardous. These chemicals are all around us, in the packaging our food is wrapped in, cleaning products, furniture, clothes and the toys that children play with. They are invisible toxic pollutants which are linked to increases in cancers and neurological, hormonal, immune and reproductive diseases.

Plastic pollution impacts some people, especially marginalised groups such as women, more than others, reinforcing social inequalities. [Millions of tonnes of plastic waste have been exported](#) from rich countries to be dumped in the global south. In Scotland, [waste exports of plastic have more than tripled](#) in the 10 years from 2013 to 2022. In the global south, waste is often managed by informal workers, known as waste pickers, who salvage valuable material from rubbish by hand. 20 million people, including children, earn their income this way and face unsafe and dangerous working conditions. [60% of all recycled plastics are managed by waste pickers](#).

In Scotland, much of the plastic we use is unnecessary, designed for single use and often not even recyclable. People see the impact of plastic litter and throwaway products in their daily lives and support for change is high, with [88% of Scottish adults concerned about plastic pollution](#).

Although it is well known that plastic is damaging us and the environment, more and more of it is made every year. Production is forecast to triple by 2060. [Only 9% of all the plastic ever made has been recycled](#). The rest is littered, burnt or dumped in landfill. **We are in the depths of a self-created plastics crisis.**

What are the solutions to the plastics crisis?

Measures in place today, such as recycling and banning selective products, have proven insufficient in addressing the plastic crisis. In 2018, the [Scottish](#) and [UK Governments](#) signed the New Plastics Economy Global Commitment. Just 4 years later, the [2025 targets are expected to be missed](#). In Scotland, a year after the single use plastic ban was introduced, [not a single fine had been issued](#). These policies are failing because they don't fully address the root cause of the plastics crisis – the continual growth of plastics production.

We must reduce primary plastic production. This means switching from all single use product systems to re-useable ones (rather than selectively banning individual products), making companies pay for the cleanup of their polluting products and putting people at the heart of plans for change.

Only policy makers can hold producers and retailers to account for the harm created in their plastic products. Many of the actions required to achieve this must be taken at a local level.

What is being included in the Global Plastics Treaty?

The UK, along with 63 other countries, is part of the High Ambition Coalition of the Global Plastics Treaty negotiations. Their shared ambition is to end plastic pollution by 2040.

To be effective, the Global Plastics treaty must contain several key components:

- It must be legally binding, to ensure all parties take action on their promises,
- The treaty must encompass the whole life cycle of plastics, with a focus on reducing primary plastic production,
- It must promote reuse rather than false solutions such as chemical recycling and plastic offsetting,
- Chemicals that are hazardous must be fully identified and eliminated,
- Financial mechanisms are needed to facilitate the flow of funds from rich countries to lower income countries. This should include proper support for waste pickers.

Other parties, especially those countries and corporations with high levels of fossil fuel and plastic production, are seeking to water down the treaty. Any weaknesses will make it harder to make real changes needed.

How can Scotland support a strong Global Plastics Treaty?

- Join over 50 countries in signing the [Bridge to Busan](#) declaration and commit to sustainable levels of primary plastic production.
- Publicly call for the UK Government to support the initiative of Peru and Rwanda in proposing a target to reduce plastic production by 40% by 2040 in the negotiations.
- Support the UK Government in their engagement in the Plastics treaty negotiations, ensuring that the UK remains an active member of the High Ambition Coalition.

What can Scotland do to create change here?

- In its forthcoming Circular Economy Strategy, include targets which reduce plastic production and waste. Transparently measure and report Scotland's plastic production, consumption and waste.
- Develop and invest in a reuse programme to improve access to reuse and repair services. The goal should be that reuse is as easy as buying new for everyone in Scotland.
- Create an extensive Extended Producer Responsibility Programme to ensure producers and retailers pay for the cleanup of their products. Planning must begin immediately.
- Ban the burning of plastic in incinerators by 2030, as recommended in [the independent review on incineration](#) conducted for the Scottish Government in 2022.
- Properly support local authorities to enforce existing and future legislative changes, such as the Single Use Plastics ban.
- Ensure these transitions are socially just by putting communities and workers at the heart of plastic reduction plans at every stage.

The world has one more chance to ensure the Global Plastics Treaty is as strong as possible. Scotland must do all it can to make sure this happens. MSPs can support this by urging the Scottish Government to take the steps above and protect the people of Scotland, our environment and many others throughout the world who are currently suffering because of the plastics crisis.

Friends of the Earth Scotland are available to discuss this briefing and provide supporting materials if required. For more information contact mclarke@foe.scot or 0131 243 2700.