



UNIVERSITY OF  
PORTSMOUTH  
REVOLUTION PLASTICS  
INSTITUTE

# POLICY BRIEF

## WHY LOCAL AUTHORITIES SHOULD RESTRICT SINGLE USE PLASTIC ADVERTISING

Photo: © Starbucks

*For the attention of councillors and local authority officials in the UK*

Advertising encourages people to buy single use plastic items. As evidence grows about the health and environmental harms of plastic, **this policy brief uses the example of Portsmouth City Council, which has already introduced an Advertising and Sponsorship Policy restricting single use plastics, to explain why more local authorities should limit such advertising across their estates.**

1...

Single use plastic items (plastic-containing products designed to be used once and then thrown away) include takeaway containers, packets and wrappers<sup>1</sup>. Around half of all new plastic, generated from fossil fuels, is made for single use<sup>2</sup>, generating carbon emissions and waste which is often not recycled<sup>3</sup>.

2...

Single use plastic items pose a significant health risk, for example, through microplastic and chemical exposure<sup>4</sup>.

3...

Plastic waste management cost local authorities £553.7 million in the 2025/2026 business year<sup>5</sup>.

4...

Advertising promotes products packaged in single use plastic whilst omitting the resulting cost of waste<sup>6</sup>.

5...

Local authorities are increasingly applying advertising restrictions to harmful products such as fossil fuels, gambling platforms and unhealthy foods. Given the health, environmental and financial costs of single use plastics, extending these restrictions to include single use plastic items would deliver clear public benefits.

6...

Local authorities have already begun to act. In February 2026, Portsmouth City Council updated their Advertising and Sponsorship Policy to refuse advertising or sponsorship "that explicitly promotes single use plastics."

7...

We recommend that local authorities implement a coordinated suite of policies that restrict advertising and sponsorship promoting single use plastic items while prioritising promotion of zero-waste products and services.

# What are single use plastics?

Single use plastic items are **products that are made of or contain plastic, designed to be used only once**<sup>7</sup>. These include<sup>8</sup>:

- Packets and wrappers<sup>9</sup>
- Plastic lined takeaway cups and boxes
- Single use bottles
- Plastic Bags

# Why local authorities should take action to reduce the sale of single use plastic items

As more plastic items are produced, pollution increases<sup>10</sup>. Actions to reduce the sale of single use plastic items directly benefits multiple local authority priorities.

## 1 Public Health

Single use plastic items, such as food and beverage packaging, threaten our health and the health of future generations<sup>11</sup> through exposure to toxic chemicals and microplastics that enter our bodies<sup>12</sup>. Preventative measures to reduce plastic pollution support public health priorities.

## 2 Public Concern

Research indicates that 80% of people feel "extremely concerned" about the health risks of microplastic exposure, but that their concerns are not reflected well enough in political priorities<sup>13</sup>

## 3 Climate Change

Over 300 UK local authorities have declared Climate Emergencies and adopted Net Zero policies<sup>14,15</sup>. Plastics are responsible for an estimated 3.4% of global greenhouse gas emissions, about half of which comes from the production of single use plastics<sup>14</sup>. Action on plastic pollution is also action on climate change.

Reducing our use of single use plastic items helps local authorities tackle key waste management challenges, including:

## 1 Economic Burden

Managing plastic waste falls to local authorities. Across the UK, plastic waste management costs local authorities £553.7 million a year<sup>17</sup> while litter cleanup cost English local authorities £700m annually<sup>18</sup>.

## 2 Littering

Single use plastic items are often used for "food on the go" and are frequently littered, requiring cleanup by local councils<sup>19</sup>. Public anxiety about litter has worsened, with data from Keep Britain Tidy suggesting that litter impacts people's feelings of safety, health and wellbeing; 70% of people feel that littering has gotten worse<sup>20</sup>.



# Advertising drives consumption and waste

Advertising encourages people to buy single use plastic items, which adds to waste and pollution. Local authorities can help by limiting adverts for these products in the spaces they manage.

**Local authorities already restrict advertising for harmful products.**

- Local authorities are increasingly restrict advertisements for products which are not in the public's interest<sup>21,22</sup>, such as gambling platforms and unhealthy food<sup>23</sup>.

**Major plastic polluters advertise extensively in cities.**

- Corporations such as Coca-Cola and Nestlé dominate city-centre advertising landscapes<sup>23</sup>. Both companies have been identified among the world's largest single use plastic polluters<sup>24</sup>.

**Advertising undermines environmental messaging.**

- Whilst public bodies try to build public understanding of the waste hierarchy (reduce, reuse, for instance), advertising often promotes an opposing message: to buy more disposable things<sup>25</sup>.

**Advertising continues to promote recycling as a solution to plastic waste.**

- Adverts often use recycling symbols to make products seem environmentally friendly. However, recycling is failing to keep up with growing single use plastic item use<sup>26,27</sup>.

**Advertising space could be used more responsibly.**

- By refusing to promote single use plastic items, local authorities can make space to advertise zero-waste products and local services, such as package-free shops and repair cafés<sup>28</sup>.



Photo: © KitKat

## CASE STUDY: Portsmouth City Council bans single use plastics advertising

Following roundtable discussions with University of Portsmouth researchers, environmental organisations and local activists, in February 2026, Portsmouth City Council (PCC) became the first UK council to restrict the advertising of single use plastic items across its estate.

- 1... The policy prohibits explicit single use plastic advertising from all council-owned publications, poster sites, parking machines, car parks, public transport areas and screens.
- 2... The council will no longer permit sponsorship of events (such as food fayres and sporting events) from companies that promote single use plastic items<sup>29</sup>.
- 3... With waste disposal costs for PCC reaching £8.6m per year<sup>30</sup>, this policy has the potential to reduce the economic burden of processing plastic waste.
- 4... The policy was partly motivated by Portsmouth City Council's ambition to improve the health of Portsmouth residents.

"...the roundtable organised by researchers from the Revolution Plastics Institute helped to highlight the evidence around harmful advertising, which supported the council's decision to prohibit content specifically promoting single use plastics, along with the commitment not to accept advertising the conflicts with its public health responsibilities, in its updated advertising and sponsorship policy approved by Cabinet in February 2026"

*Matthew Gummerson – Portsmouth City Council*

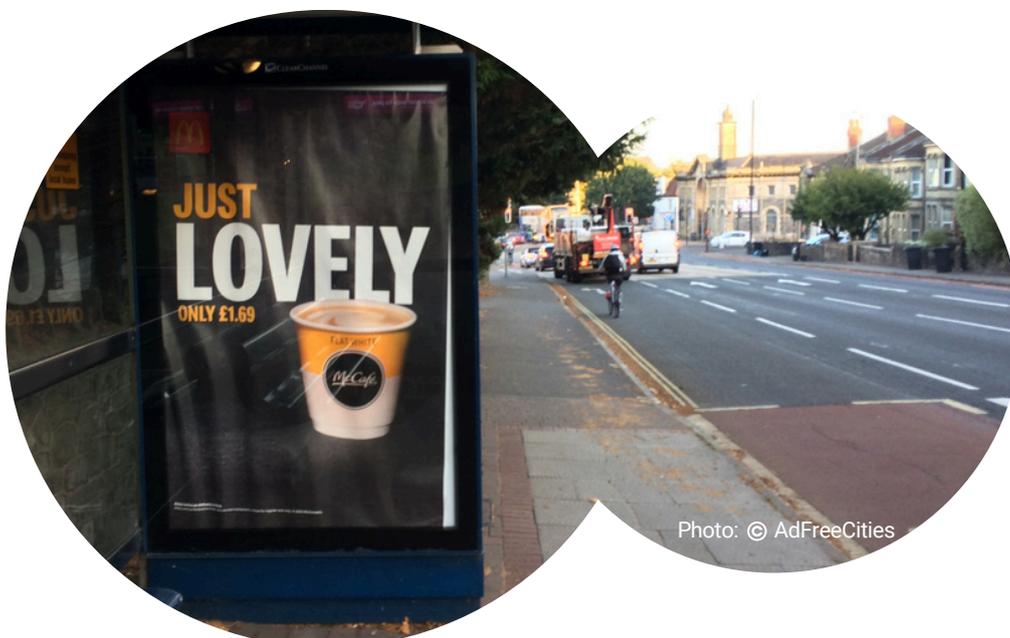


Photo: © AdFreeCities

# Recommendations

## RECOMMENDATION #1

### **Restrict advertising that promotes single use plastic items across local authority owned estates.**

Local authorities should develop a policy to restrict advertising of single use plastic items across all council-owned publications, poster sites, parking machines, car parks, public transport areas and screens. The policy should be unambiguous and define the single use plastic items included in the advertising restrictions, e.g., disposable cups, single use bottles and takeaway packaging.

## RECOMMENDATION #2

### **Restrict local authority-run events from accepting sponsorship from companies that promote single use plastic items.**

Local authorities should reject sponsorship from companies that promote single use plastics from council events including but not limited to music festivals, civic celebrations, sporting events and food festivals.

## RECOMMENDATION #3

### **Prioritise advertising space for zero-waste products and services.**

Replace adverts for single use plastic items with adverts for zero-waste products and services such as reusable coffee cups, repair cafés and package-free shops.



## Conclusion

By restricting adverts that promote single use plastic items, councils can reduce plastic waste and better protect people's health and the environment.

Clear, practical policies are key. This means defining what counts as single use plastic, setting out which items may not be advertised, and using public spaces to promote zero-waste alternatives



## About the Revolution Plastics Institute

Based at the University of Portsmouth, the Revolution Plastics Institute's mission is to urgently confront the global plastics crisis through inclusive, solutions-focused research and innovation.



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You can also view the Global Plastics Policy Centre's outputs here: <https://plasticpolicy.port.ac.uk/>



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