

POLICY BRIEF

A fair and transparent approach to single-use cup charges in the UK

Evidence to inform the introduction of a mandatory minimum 20p charge on single-use cups

SUMMARY

Around 2.5 billion single-use cups are used in the UK each year, yet less than 1% are recycled. Consumers are often unaware that they are paying for single-use cups, thereby missing the opportunity to save money by choosing a more sustainable alternative. These cups contribute to litter, contaminate recycling streams, and increase waste management costs for local authorities and taxpayers. Although many cafés and retailers already apply a charge for single-use cups, these charges vary in both price and visibility, and our research indicates that 92% of consumers are unsure whether they are being charged at the point of purchase. As a result, consumers are unable to make fully informed purchasing decisions and may miss the opportunity to save money by using a reusable cup. This brief recommends introducing a mandatory minimum 20p, separately itemised charge on all single-use cups. Making the charge uniform and visible would provide a clear and memorable price signal, encouraging consumers to make more sustainable, cost saving choices, similar to the successful single-use carrier bag charge. With Scotland already committed to implementing a mandatory single-use cup charge, governments across the UK have an opportunity to adopt a consistent policy framework that aligns with broader packaging reforms and provides businesses with clear regulatory direction.

CASE FOR ACTION

Reduce litter and avoidable public expenditure:

Single-use cups account for 8% of litter volume in the UK [1], creating avoidable street cleaning and waste-management costs for local authorities and taxpayers.

Improve consumer transparency:

Consumers should know when they are paying for a single-use cup [2] and understand that using a reusable cup can save them money.

Support investment and innovation in reuse and refill:

A charge would encourage investment in reusable cup infrastructure, washing systems and other circular business models [3].

Create a consistent market:

Aligning policy with Scotland across the UK [4] would reduce complexity for businesses, provide a consistent experience for consumers, and complement wider packaging reforms that prioritise waste prevention and reuse both nationally and regionally.

BACKGROUND AND EVIDENCE

Every year, around 2.5 billion single-use cups are used across the UK, yet less than 1% are recycled [1].

Despite the common perception that single-use cups are recyclable, only around 0.25% are recycled. The mix of materials used to manufacture them (plastic and paper) limits recyclability, while ambiguous messaging around their recyclability contributes to incorrect disposal. As an on-the-go packaging item, single-use cups are frequently littered or disposed of in mixed waste streams, contributing to unnecessary waste, contaminating recycling, and increasing the costs of waste collection and street cleansing borne by local authorities and ultimately taxpayers.

Current approaches to reducing single-use cup waste have had limited success in changing consumer behaviour.

Voluntary charges for single-use cups or discounts for reusable cups are applied inconsistently and are often not communicated clearly [5]. Our research found that 92% of consumers are unaware of whether they are being charged for a single-use cup, suggesting that existing charging practices are largely invisible and therefore unlikely to provide a meaningful behavioural incentive. Behavioural evidence shows that price signals are most effective when visible at the point decisions are made [6]. Making a single-use cup cost explicit therefore increases consumers capacity to make more informed decisions whilst encouraging reusable alternatives. If consumers are unaware that they are paying for single-use packaging, they are also unlikely to recognise that choosing a reusable alternative could save them money.

Reuse can be achieved in several ways.

Consumers may bring their own reusable cups (refill), retailers may offer cups that are borrowed and returned within the same café (closed-loop reuse), or cups may be borrowed and returned through shared collection and washing systems that operate across multiple retailers (open-loop reuse). As governments increasingly seek to support circular business models and resource-efficient economic growth [7], creating the market conditions for these different forms of reuse is becoming an important policy priority. A transparent charging framework can support all three approaches by making single-use cups the less attractive default option.

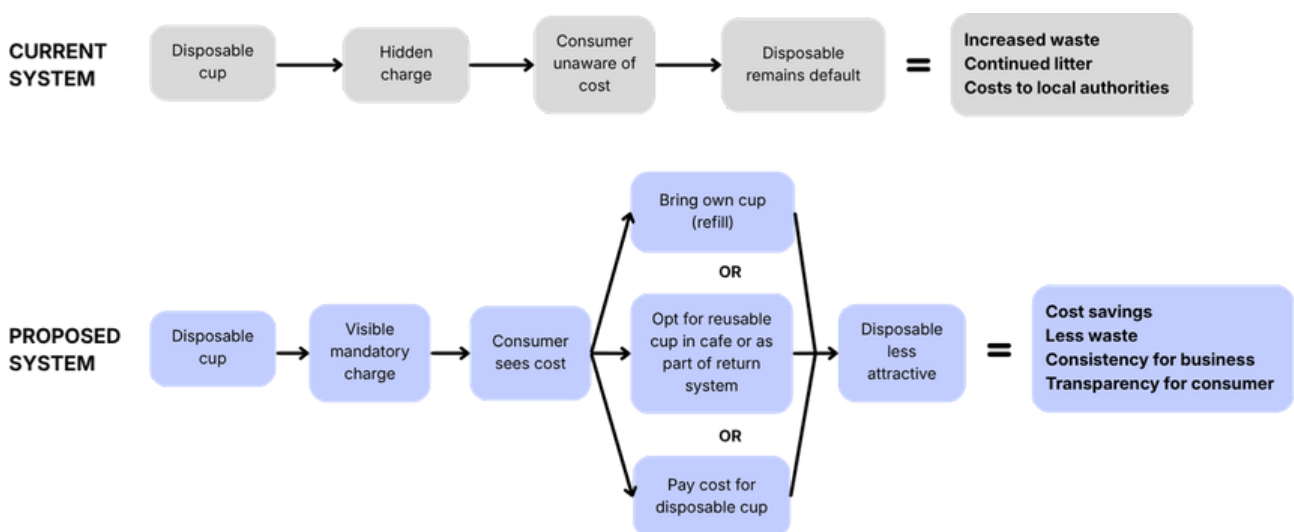


Figure 1. Current system and proposed system for increased transparency of single-use cup charges.

BACKGROUND AND EVIDENCE CONTINUED

The policy context has shifted significantly.

For example, the Scottish Government has committed to introducing a charge on single-use beverage cups [4], while the incoming EU Packaging and Packaging Waste Regulation (PPWR) places greater emphasis on reducing packaging waste through reuse systems and refill, including measures to increase the availability and uptake of reusable packaging [8]. The experience of the single-use carrier bag charge demonstrates that a small, mandatory and universally applied charge can change consumer behaviour, reduce reliance on disposable products, and normalise more sustainable choices [9,10]. A consistent approach across the UK would complement this wider policy direction, reduce regulatory complexity for businesses operating across national borders, and provide greater confidence to invest in reusable cup products and the washing and reverse-logistics infrastructure needed to support reuse at scale, with the potential to create green jobs in circular economy supply chains [3].

Reducing unnecessary single-use cup consumption would also reduce pressure on public services.

Single-use cups contribute around 8% of litter by volume in England, increasing demand for street cleansing, collection and waste management. Reducing unnecessary single-use cup consumption through a mandatory and transparent charge therefore has the potential to deliver savings for local authorities while supporting cleaner public spaces and a more resource-efficient economy [11].



POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

A mandatory single-use cup charge would support the UK's wider transition towards waste prevention while helping to reduce litter, improve transparency for consumers, and deliver savings in public waste management. The following evidence-based recommendations provide a practical route to implementation.

1 Introduce a minimum 20p charge on all single-use cups

A mandatory, uniform charge would make the cost of single-use cups visible and memorable, helping consumers make informed choices and encouraging a shift towards reusable alternatives. Applying the charge universally would create a level playing field for businesses and avoid the confusion created by inconsistent voluntary approaches or different policies across the UK and regional borders.

2 Require transparent point-of-sale communication and separate itemisation

To improve transparency and strengthen the behavioural impact of the policy, it would be necessary to require retailers to:

- display the charge prominently at the point of purchase;
- itemise the charge separately on receipts and digital orders;
- clearly communicate how consumers can avoid the charge by using a reusable cup.

Our research indicated that 92% of consumers are unaware whether they are being charged for a single-use cup, meaning existing voluntary charges are unlikely to change behaviour. Furthermore, when the cost of a single-use cup was made clear, more customers chose reusable cups and cafés benefited from greater consumer goodwill.

3 Ensure the charge remains avoidable by consumers

The charge should be applied as a separate, mandatory fee rather than being incorporated into the price of drinks. Consumers should be able to avoid the charge by choosing a reusable option, ensuring the policy functions as a behavioural incentive rather than a general increase in the cost of takeaway drinks. Consumers who bring their own reusable cup would pay nothing, reinforcing the message that the charge is wholly avoidable.

4 Establish a baseline of current charging practices and monitor implementation outcomes

Governments should establish a clear framework of cup charging practices before implementation, establish a straightforward reporting process, and publish periodic evaluations thereafter to understand the prevalence of charging, consumer response, and impacts on reusable cup uptake. This evidence would support effective policy design and help measure progress following implementation.

About this policy brief

This policy brief draws on evidence from a research programme examining single-use cup use and reusable cup adoption. The evidence includes:

- A review of existing academic and policy evidence on single-use cup consumption and behavioural pricing interventions.
- A field experiment testing the impact of single-use cup charges on disposable versus reusable cup consumption across three University cafés.
- Surveys of café customers exploring perceptions of single-use cup charges and reusable cup use.
- Qualitative interviews with café users examining barriers and enablers to reusable cup adoption.
- Interviews with policy, retail and behavioural science experts regarding the feasibility and acceptability of single-use cup charging policies.

For more information about this brief and the research behind it, please email: kate.whitman@port.ac.uk



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. For more queries, please email revolutionplastics@port.ac.uk

For queries about the **Global Plastics Policy Centre's research**, please email globalplastics@port.ac.uk, or visit the website at <https://plasticspolicy.port.ac.uk/research/>

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