

Member Motion: Deposit Return Scheme as proposed by Councillors Pepper and Caton

Council – Thursday, 8 October

Motion

The Council welcomes the Government's plan to introduce a Deposit Return Scheme to encourage increased recycling of glass, plastic bottles and cans. The Council also urges the Government to consider wider fiscal measures to ensure producers of ALL packaging, particularly 'on the go' products, make them reusable or readily recyclable through existing infrastructure.

Background

A Deposit Return Scheme (DRS) is a financial incentive to encourage consumers to return a used product to allow it to be reused or recycled. It is not a new concept and some Members may well recall historical schemes where glass bottles were returned to a shop to be reused in exchange for money. Schemes continue to operate successfully across the world.

In an effort to increase recycling rates of plastic, metal and glass containers, and reduce consumption of raw materials, the U.K. Government has stated its intent to introduce a new, consistent, Deposit Return Scheme across the U.K. by 2023. The Scottish Government has already committed to implementing its scheme by 2022. The exact detail of how a new scheme will work, in practical terms on the ground or, how the financial system will be managed, has not yet been determined. The Government was due to consult on these aspects during 2020 but understandably the process has been delayed. However it is already clear that the proposed system will be a recycling initiative not a reuse / refill system.

In part, this recycling focused approach has disappointed environmental campaign groups who would prefer to see more efforts to reduce resource usage and a reduction in waste produced. They might argue that, if we all drank water from a reusable container filled from the tap we would significantly reduce the amount of plastic waste produced and therefore a DRS would be not needed.

It is the consensus view of the Local Authority Recycling Advisory Committee (LARAC), the relevant body which represents waste collection (District) and disposal (Counties) authorities across the UK, that a DRS scheme will have a negative impact on Local Authority recycling schemes. A DRS is highly likely to target the most easily recycled and high value items that are collected from the widespread kerbside collections across the country. Local Authority service costs could be negatively affected as material migrates to a different route and high value items are lost. It is likely that Local Authority recycling rates will fall as material is diverted elsewhere. However, there is also an argument that a DRS may reduce litter as motivated

people may collect items to receive the deposit which in turn may help reduce street cleansing costs.

It is worth noting that in Countries or States where Deposit Return Schemes are most successful there are limited kerbside recycling collections. In England most councils now operate extensive opportunities to recycle the materials that are proposed to be included in the DRS.

Alongside the Government's proposals for DRS, there is a plan to implement Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) and this would require manufacturers, suppliers and retailers to be held responsible for the full cost of recycling, reprocessing or disposing of their products at the end of their life. There is widespread agreement in the waste industry that EPR should be introduced first because this is more likely to encourage producers to improve environmental performance, for example it might be that we see more reuse / refill schemes develop. It is also more likely that that EPR will support existing collection and reprocessing infrastructure.

It is worth noting that the packing manufacturers in the UK are, to an extent, required to fund the recycling of package waste generated. This obligation has existed for many years and has meant that producers are required to either directly recycle or purchase packaging recover notes which can be provided by legitimate companies. This process provides some financial assistance to fund resource and waste management infrastructure which helps local authorities recycle.

Between the existing and proposed schemes (DRS and EPR) there is a potential gap where existing difficult items such as take away drinks (coffee cups) and food packaging (sandwich wrappers) 'escapes' legislative intervention. The Council could ask or encourage the Government to consider additional fiscal measures to help ensure consumers are encouraged to reuse their coffee cups or that take away and businesses use more sustainable packaging.

Conclusion

It is clear that the issues and systems used to manage resources and waste are complex. A DRS scheme is very likely to be introduced by the Government and will certainly impact on consumer habits as has been demonstrated by the charge for single use plastic bags.

From the District Council's perspective both DRS, EPR and changing consumer habits will alter the materials collected and the value obtained from them. As the Council starts to consider its future approach to managing waste and issues such as carbon consumption, a flexible approach will be required as the next 10 years are likely to see a significant shift in collection methodologies.

In principle any effort to improve environmental performance should be supported but consideration must be/should be given to any unintended consequences associated with new legislation or schemes.