

A Deposit Return Scheme for drinks containers

(Consultation by DEFRA, closed 4th June 2021)

<https://consult.defra.gov.uk/environment/consultation-on-introducing-a-drs/>

The government's proposal is to have a national scheme from 2024, whereby if people buy drinks in cans and bottles there is a small deposit in the price, which can be recovered by returning them to collection points. Such schemes are proposed for England, Wales, N Ireland and Scotland. They already exist in other European countries, parts of USA and Australia. BFOE has had a campaign in favour, which we called Don't Lose your Bottle. This was our response to the 2020 consultation into the details of the scheme.

Do you support or oppose our proposals to implement a deposit return scheme for drinks containers in 2024?

Birmingham FoE supports the proposals, for the following reasons.

We are convinced that transforming waste management and the waste hierarchy are key to achieving Net Zero Carbon targets. We have submitted a petition from people in the city in 2018, supporting the introduction of a national Deposit Return Scheme for bottles. We know such schemes do work well in other countries.

There is a widespread and persistent litter problem across Birmingham, with many people apparently sure that the thing to do with unwanted drinks containers is to throw them on the ground for someone else to pick up. The Council cleansing teams cannot keep up with the daily flood of litter. Residents should not be expected to litter pick their streets, for free. DRS will be a new way to show that there is a return route through shops, which is not inconvenient, since people go to shops anyway. There will be a small financial penalty for not returning, which we think will make the difference to people's behaviour. "Polluter pays" is a fair and necessary principle.

The scheme will reward pro-social behaviour. Places of worship, community, leisure and arts centres and other locations, as well as shops will be willing to host reverse vending machines for a small fee, we believe. It will be an easy way to donate to charities and good causes. It will empower Birmingham people with a new way to solve the rubbish and recycling problem.

There is a low recycling rate in Birmingham, reported as 23% of council-collected waste, and it has hardly increased for years, because there is a conflict with the long term contract to incinerate waste (ends 2024). People have had no incentive to separate for recycling, while what is collected is often contaminated and hence is not recycled, we believe. DRS would create a stream of material in a form suited to recycling and would keep it out of the Council's waste system, which is heavily dependent on incineration and contracts with perverse incentives to burn waste. DRS therefore complements the measures to achieve a consistent best practice recycling collection, also in the Environment Bill, and Producer Responsibility.

Removing drinks containers from street litter bins will help them to cope with the volume of waste. Taking them out of the Birmingham household collections should release space in bins and vehicles to collect items which are currently not separated (but burned) such as clothing, electrical goods, and food waste. Giving waste items a monetary value will generally change attitudes in the city to throwing things "away" (which in reality means disposal by incineration, with its massive carbon emissions).

Birmingham City Council has been very underpowered in communicating messages to its diverse population about waste, litter and recycling. Only a national scheme that is widely promoted and generally understood will help with Birmingham's Rubbish Emergency, and DRS offers to be such a game changing scheme with an incentive to contribute, for the first time.

Have your views towards implementation of a deposit return scheme been affected following the economic and social impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic?

Lockdown temporarily reduced the amount of litter in streets and parks. Many people in Birmingham have been walking daily and picking up litter individually or in groups, because we/they do not want to go back to the previous levels of mess. A deposit scheme seems to be the only way to incentivise the return of cans and bottles to prevent littering. Although there is an upfront cost on each item, people can get their money back and can even earn from collecting stray containers, so the overall cost for people on low incomes should not be an issue. There is a new trend to shop on local high streets and it will be important that machines are placed there and not only in the car parks of superstores.

Having read the rationale for either an All-in or On-the-Go scheme, which do you consider to be the best option for our deposit return scheme?

The 'All In' option will have a maximum effect on the litter problem in cities such as Birmingham, it will be the simplest to communicate and understand and it will incentivise the greatest return of containers to recycling. It will free up space in the household bins. The scheme should be as wide ranging and simple as possible, so as to get public participation. Unfortunately, environmental messaging is not received by everyone, but all do understand money, hence the 10p charge on carrier bags has been very successful in reducing single trip bags Birmingham.

Do you consider there will be any material switching as a result of the proposed scope?

Yes. Producers may switch to drinks cartons, which are not included in the scheme, so perhaps they should be included

What evidence will be required to ensure that all material collected is passed to a re-processor for the purpose of calculating the rate of recycling of deposit return scheme material?

This is an important matter. We do not know if material “collected for the purpose of recycling” in Birmingham is in fact recycled. The public has a basic scepticism about whether recycling does actually take place, so the evidencing has to be robust to ensue confidence and to avoid abuse and misrepresentation, or suspicion of such.

Do you agree that all retailers selling in-scope drinks containers should be obligated to host a return point..?

No. Realistically small shops may not have space, but they could share a machine with neighbours in a cluster of shops.

BFOE only answered the questions where we have a specific contribution to make that is environmental issues relating to Birmingham, since national organisations will take up more general or technical points about how the scheme will operate best.