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trading standards law explained

Single-use plastics

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In this guide, the words 'must' or 'must not' are used where there is a legal requirement to do (or not do) something. The word 'should' is used where there is established legal guidance or best practice that is likely to help you avoid breaking the law.

This guidance is for England

The Environmental Protection (Plastic Plates etc and Polystyrene Containers etc) (England) Regulations 2023 prohibit the supply (or offering to supply) of any single-use plastic plates, bowls and trays, cutlery and balloon sticks, or polystyrene food or drink containers and cups in England (not all types of polystyrene are covered by the Regulations).

The Environmental Protection (Plastic Straws, Cotton Buds and Stirrers) (England) Regulations 2020 prohibit the supply (or offering to supply) of any single-use plastic straw, plastic-stemmed cotton bud or plastic drink stirrer in England.

The Environmental Protection (Microbeads) (England) Regulations 2017 prohibit the manufacture and sale of rinse-off personal care products containing plastic microbeads.

There are some exemptions to these prohibitions.

Damage caused

These regulations have been introduced to reduce plastic pollution in the oceans. It is estimated that we use 4.7 billion plastic straws, 316 million plastic stirrers, 1.8 billion plastic-stemmed cotton buds, 2.7 billion items of single-use cutlery and 721 million single-use plates in England every year, many of which find their way into our ocean. By banning the supply of these items, the Government aims to further protect our marine wildlife and ultimately eliminate all avoidable plastic waste, as set out in the 25-year environment plan.

The pieces of plastic used as microbeads are washed down the drain after use and cannot be filtered out by many wastewater treatment plants. Therefore, they easily enter and pollute waterways. Although microbeads only represent a small proportion of the plastic waste in the ocean, fish and other marine animals can eat them (because of their size), introducing potentially toxic substances into the food chain. According to a report by the Environmental Audit Committee, a single shower can flush as many as 100,000 microbeads, with this adding up to 86 tonnes per year from the UK alone.

The products covered by the legislation are amongst the most commonly found items on beaches throughout Europe. In a summary of its 2020 study, the Pew Charitable Trusts and SystemIQ stated that the "flow of plastic into the ocean is projected to nearly triple by 2040. Without considerable action to address plastic pollution, 50 kg of plastic will enter the ocean for every metre of shoreline."

Plastic straws, cotton bud stems and drink stirrers are consistently in the 10 most commonly found items in beach surveys. Around 15% of plastic ocean waste washes up on shore, which can increase the risk to public health from contact on beaches and bathing waters. The rest remains in the ocean where fish and other marine animals can eat them (because of their size), introducing potentially toxic substances into the food chain.

Plastic cotton bud stems, particularly, are consistently observed to constitute approximately 5-10% of marine debris surveyed in European seas. Fish and other marine animals can eat them (because of their size), introducing potentially toxic substances into the food chain. They also increase the risk to public health from contact on beaches and bathing waters. The Cotton Bud Project has demonstrated that manufacturers and retailers are able to trade in viable biodegradable alternative products; therefore, there is no known reason why other companies would be unable to follow this best practice.

Campaigns to promote changes in behaviour have failed to stop the irresponsible disposal of these items. Cotton buds are commonly flushed down toilets, and sewage treatment works cannot prevent all of them from reaching the sea. When entering sewage systems, the plastic stems do not settle with organics; their buoyancy allows them to flow through plant equipment and their narrow diameter means they are not caught by all screens. Straws and drink stirrers are rarely recycled due to their size and the effort required to remove any food debris. Only 10% of plastic plates, cutlery, etc is recycled.

Products covered by the ban

The ban applies to:

- single-use plastic
  - straws
  - cotton buds
  - drink stirrers
  - plates, bowls and trays
  - cutlery
  - balloon sticks

- polystyrene (please see 'Definitions' below)
    - food or drink containers
    - cups
- microbeads, when they are used in a 'rinse-off personal care product' (see 'Definitions' below)

Definitions

The Regulations define 'plastic' as "a material consisting of polymer ... to which additives or other substances may have been added, and which can function as a main structural component of final products, with the exception of natural polymers that have not been chemically modified".

'Single-use plastic-stemmed cotton buds' are rods made wholly or partly of plastic, which have cotton wrapped around both ends. 'Single-use plastic straws' are those that are made wholly or partly from plastic. Neither are designed or intended to be re-used. These products must not be supplied to end-users except in certain circumstances, as outlined in 'Exemptions' below. This does not prohibit supply to businesses. Some drinking straws made from paper do contain small amounts of plastic in the adhesive lining, and these are still permitted. Drinking straws supplied with drinks cartons are also covered by the legislation.

'Plastic drink stirrers' are those made wholly or partly of plastic and used for stirring drinks. These must not be supplied in any circumstances; there are no exceptions.

'Single-use plastic plate, tray or bowl' means any item that is designed or intended to be used as a plate, tray or bowl, made wholly or partly from plastic, and not designed or intended to be re-used. There are some exemptions where these items are classed as 'packaging' (see below).

'Single-use plastic cutlery' means items that are designed or intended to be used as, or in the same way as, a knife, fork, spoon or chopstick, made wholly or partly from plastic, and not designed or intended to be re-used.

'Single-use plastic balloon stick' means a stick, including its attachment mechanism, that is designed or intended to be attached to and support balloons, made wholly or partly from plastic, and not designed or intended to be re-used.

'Single-use polystyrene food or drink container and cup' means a receptacle such as a box, or a cup, with or without a lid or cover, that is made wholly or partly from expanded or foamed extruded polystyrene, used to contain food or drink that is ready to be consumed, and not designed or intended to be re-used. The Regulations, therefore, only apply to extruded polystyrene (XPS) and expanded polystyrene (EPS), and not, for example, crystal polystyrene, which can be used to make clear plastic drinking glasses.

A 'microbead' is defined in the Regulations as "any water-insoluble solid plastic particle of less than or equal to 5 mm in any dimension".

A 'rinse-off personal care product' is defined in the Regulations as "any substance, or mixture of substances, manufactured for the purpose of being applied to any relevant human body part in the course of any personal care treatment, by an application which entails at its completion the prompt and specific removal of the product (or any residue of the product) by washing or rinsing with water, rather than leaving it to wear off or wash off, or be absorbed or shed, in the course of time".

The microbeads ban only applies to those made of plastic. Please note that the Environmental Protection (Microbeads) (England) Regulations 2017 have a slightly different definition of 'plastic' to that given above. For the full definition, see regulation 2 (the link to the Regulations is given in 'Key legislation' below).

Identifying whether microbeads are contained in rinse-off personal care products

Although the ban covers plastic microbeads up to 5 mm in dimension, many are much smaller than this, and it can be difficult to identify them and determine what compounds they contain.

Rinse-off personal care products containing microbeads have a granular appearance, and larger microbeads can be seen with the naked eye and felt by the texture of the product between the fingers. Smaller microbeads are more difficult to see and feel, and it is not usually possible to determine whether the microbeads are plastic or legally permitted soluble alternatives.

The ingredients list can be useful in identifying the presence of plastics such as polyethylene and polyethylene terephthalate, which are common ingredients of plastic microbeads. The product information file (PIF) for the cosmetic product must also contain information about the presence of microbeads. All cosmetic products must have a PIF, so distributors and retailers may request this information from the manufacturer.

Exemptions

There are several exceptions to the prohibitions.

For straws and cotton buds, these exceptions allow for situations where the items may be required due to disability or accessibility issues.

The following supplies of single-use plastic straws are permitted:

- from a registered pharmacy, but products must not be displayed or advertised in store
- from a catering establishment (pubs, clubs, restaurants, canteens, etc) where supplied for immediate consumption of food or drink. They must only be supplied if requested and not made available for customers to help themselves. They cannot be offered either verbally or in writing
- for use as a medical device or for a medical purpose. This includes preventative medicine, medical diagnosis, research, and care and treatment
- for use as packaging for a product - for example, certain medicines. This does not exempt drinking straws supplied with drinks cartons
- for use in care homes, prisons, schools and early years provision, but alternatives should be sought where possible

The following supplies of plastic cotton buds are permitted:

- for use as a medical device or for a medical purpose. This includes preventative medicine, medical diagnosis, research, and care and treatment
- for forensic purposes: use by forensic service providers
- for scientific purposes: diagnostic, education and research

The following supplies of plastic plates, bowls and trays are permitted:

- supply to other businesses
- where the item is 'packaging'

'Packaging' means products to be used for the containment, protection, handling, delivery and presentation of goods. This would include pre-filled packages (such as salad bowls), packaging that is filled at the point of sale (such as a takeaway counter or a salad bar in a supermarket), and packaging used for

deliveries.

The following supplies of polystyrene (XPS / EPS) food or drink containers and cups are permitted:

- where the food is not ready to be consumed and requires further preparation, such as adding water or heating

Carrier bags

For information on plastic carrier bags, please see 'Single-use carrier bags'.

Single-use vapes

Single-use / disposable vapes were banned on 1 June 2025, due to their environmental impact. For more information on the ban, and on the types of vapes that can continue to be sold, please see 'Tobacco and vapes'.

Wet wipes

Wet wipes containing plastic will, with some exceptions, be banned In England from 19 May 2027. The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) has published guidance on the plastic wet wipes ban.

Further information

Defra has published guidance on single-use plastics bans and restrictions.

Trading Standards

For more information on the work of Trading Standards services and the possible consequences of not abiding by the law, please see 'Trading Standards: powers, enforcement and penalties'.

In this update

No major changes.

Last reviewed / updated: February 2026

Key legislation

- Environmental Protection (Microbeads) (England) Regulations 2017
- Environmental Protection (Plastic Straws, Cotton Buds and Stirrers) (England) Regulations 2020
- Environmental Protection (Plastic Plates etc and Polystyrene Containers etc) (England) Regulations 2023

Please note

This information is intended for guidance; only the courts can give an authoritative interpretation of the law.

The guide's 'Key legislation' links go to the legislation.gov.uk website. The site usually updates the legislation to include any amendments made to it. However, this is not always the case. Information on all changes made to legislation can be found by following the above links and clicking on the 'More Resources' tab.

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