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Future of Britain Project

Online Deliberation June 2019

Expert Responses to Questions about Consumer Regulation

This pack has been written for attendees of the online deliberative polling event that was held in June 2019. It contains answers to questions about consumer regulation that were not addressed in the plenary secessions, due to time constraints. The questions have been answered by one of our consumer regulation experts and are grouped under broad subject headings:

- General
- Flight Compensation
- Light Bulbs
- Plastic & Recycling
 - Single Use Plastic
 - Recycling
 - Food Packaging
 - Alternatives
 - Other

General

Do commercial lobbyists have a disproportionate effect on government policy and do they normally subvert public interest around issues such as flight protections, light bulbs, and roaming changes? How do we balance this with environmental interest?

Commercial lobbyists do not have a disproportionate or subversive impact, and this is especially so in respect of the European Union and the European Parliament. More broadly, this question points to concerns about 'regulatory capture', that is, the claim that concentrated interests will successfully capture regulation at the expense of diffuse consumer interests. In the area of consumer regulation, the existence of 'capture' would be a surprise as in practice it imposes costs on distinct industries to the 'benefit' of wider consumer interests. More generally, we can think of regulation as reflecting a coalition of interests. The case of light bulbs is actually interesting, because arguably the 'ban' has given rise to creative ways of complying.

Flight Compensation

What evidence is there that flight companies choose to cancel flights rather than pay compensation to customers?

If your flight is cancelled, you may still be entitled to compensation depending on the circumstances. There is more information on flight rights here:

<https://www.which.co.uk/consumer-rights/l/flights>

Light Bulbs

What research is being made/has been made on the health implications of light from LED bulbs?

Here is a pretty good study:

https://ec.europa.eu/health/sites/health/files/scientific_committees/scheer/docs/scheer_o_011.pdf

Are there any government plans for easing the transition from incandescent lights by supporting people (e.g. sending electricians round)?

We are not aware of any.

Plastic & Recycling

All of the suggestions seem eminently sensible – it is more about pace, how quickly can the government put in place legislation to address these issues once we leave the EU? If we are going to continue to reduce or ban plastics, what are the plans to adapt the supply / distribution of fresh food? That will be matters for future UK governments.

Single Use Plastic

Would it be feasible/possible to bring in a total ban on all single-use plastics?

This is unlikely, as there are some areas where single-use might still be necessary.

Have any plans been made regarding single use plastics post Brexit?

Not that we're aware of.

Recycling

How will leaving the EU impact on UK recycling policies?

We have been told by government that any policies already in place will remain.

To what extent can recycled plastic replace single use plastic? What is the availability of recycled plastic as a replacement?

Recycled plastic has a finite lifecycle (unlike glass) so can only be recycled a certain number of times as every time it is recycled the quality becomes poorer. There are also some types of plastic (e.g. polypropylene) that currently cannot be recycled and reused for food stuffs because they are also used in non-food items like bleach.

Why is there not more education given from central government to the population of UK about standard recycling requirements?

This is because different local authorities use different schemes and collect different items. There has, however, been more education in Wales, which has been successful in creating a more co-ordinated recycling collection scheme.

Currently recycling rules and regimes differ across councils. To what extent would a standardised nationwide recycling regime be viable?

It has worked in Wales so it could theoretically work in the rest of the UK.

Does the UK general public require better education on recycling and more conformity across all UK councils on recycling procedures?

Definitely, but the onus should be on manufacturers and the government to enable this.

Food Packaging

What are the ways the government could regulate shops and restaurants to reduce the use of plastic packaging?

Ensure that all of the manufacturers use the on-pack recycling label (OPRL) <https://www.oprl.org.uk/> as standard so that consumers know what can and cannot be recycled. However, manufacturers and retailers need to make sure these are accurate as research by Which? has shown that some are not correctly labelled. Taxes on vanity plastic (e.g. unnecessary black plastic or excessive single-use plastic) could also help with this.

Why isn't more pressure being put on supermarkets to make unwrapped products cheaper?

Supermarkets say they need to put up the prices of unpackaged items like fresh fruit are more perishable if sold loose. However, there is pressure from consumers and the loose items sold in the packaging-free Waitrose trial store are the same price as those in packaging.

Will the excess packaging on goods be phased out?

This may happen if there is consumer pressure to do so.

Why doesn't the government push more for investing in biodegradable packaging rather than single use plastic and looking at disposal solution

Biodegradable plastic is not necessarily the answer as not all biodegradable packaging actually biodegrades. Some of it needs to be disposed of in a specific environment to which many consumers do not have access. Otherwise, it ends up in the normal recycling stream and contaminates the "normal" plastic, or is separated out and put into landfill or incinerated. If it ends up in landfill it can produce dangerous gases like methane and may not biodegrade completely. More research needs to be done into this issue and there are some safer alternatives to plastic such as potato starch, but these need to be composted or disposed of in food waste recycling to which not all consumers have access.

Alternatives

What is the feasibility and the costs involved in switching from plastic to paper?

The issue is not as simple as swapping plastic for paper. Paper still has an impact on the environment.

How easy would it be to make manufacturing industries phase out single-use plastics? How long would it take? How could it be done?

The UK plastics pact aims to eliminate “problem plastics” by 2020. By 2025 100% of packaging will be reusable, recyclable or compostable.

Find out more here: <http://www.wrap.org.uk/content/the-uk-plastics-pact>

Other

What are the health implications of breathing in microplastics?

No one can say for sure.

What can we do to prevent plastic becoming micro-plastic?

Recycle it.

Can we invest money to find new solutions to developing alternatives to non-biodegradable plastics?

That is a question for manufacturers and government.

Can the government incentivise the reduction of plastic through taxation?

Possibly.

Is the base amount of plastic in our environments actually increasing?

Probably. See:

<https://www.sas.org.uk/our-work/plastic-pollution/plastic-pollution-facts-figures/>

What are the consequences of burning in plastic instead of exporting to other countries or finding ways to recycle here?

There are environmental concerns that may be met by technological requirements to filter out emissions.

Should we renationalize the recycling industry and is the gov seriously considering the extended producer responsibility?

Extended producer responsibility is all very well, but these regimes are associated with considerable cost and also require recycling capacity that is not as yet available.