

GUEST BLOG: IS THE UK'S DRIVE TO REDUCE VIRGIN PLASTIC USE GENUINE OR JUST HOT AIR?

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In recent years, the buzz around reducing plastic waste has hit fever pitch. Everywhere you look, from TV ads to government press releases, there's a loud and clear message: plastic is the enemy, and recycling is our saviour. But hold on a second—let's hit pause and dig a bit deeper. Is there real intent in the UK to swap virgin plastic for recycled plastic, especially when governments continue to pour massive subsidies into fossil fuels? Or is it all just a load of hot air designed to make us feel warm and fuzzy inside?

The Plastic Predicament

First off, let's get one thing straight: plastic is not inherently evil. It's versatile, durable, and—let's face it—pretty darn convenient. The problem arises from our over-reliance on virgin plastic, which is plastic made from raw fossil fuels. This process is not only resource-intensive but also leaves a hefty carbon footprint.

The UK government has been pretty vocal about its commitment to reducing plastic waste. Policies like the plastic packaging tax, which charges companies for using less than 30% recycled content in their packaging, seem to indicate a move in the right direction. But are these measures enough to outweigh the ongoing support for the fossil fuel industry?

Follow the Money: Fossil Fuel Subsidies

It's hard to ignore the elephant in the room: fossil fuel subsidies. According to a report by the International Institute for Sustainable Development, the UK spends billions annually on fossil fuel subsidies. In 2021 alone, the figure was a staggering £10.5 billion. This financial support makes virgin plastic—derived from these subsidised fossil fuels—cheaper than its recycled counterpart. So, while the government is slapping companies on the wrist with one hand for not using recycled plastic, it's effectively making virgin plastic more attractive with the other.

The Recycling Rhetoric

Recycling is hailed as the golden ticket to solving our plastic problem. And sure, it's a vital part of the solution. But the infrastructure needs to change if it's to be the silver bullet it's portrayed to be. For starters, much of our recyclable plastic still ends up in landfills due to contamination or lack of recycling facilities. (It's why we, at Convert Design, are working so hard to launch a unique plastic bottle reverse vending machine).

The reality is, recycled plastic is more expensive to produce than virgin plastic. The energy and processes involved in collecting, cleaning, and reprocessing plastic waste are costlier than simply creating new plastic. This economic disparity begs the question: if the government were genuinely committed to reducing virgin plastic use, wouldn't it address the cost imbalance more aggressively?

Actions Speak Louder Than Words

The idea of a deposit return scheme (DRS) for bottles could incentivise recycling and reduce litter. However, the actual implementation of DRS in the UK has been a different story. Despite being successfully introduced across Europe and in the Republic of Ireland, the UK's DRS has faced repeated

postponements. The latest delay pushes the introduction in England, Northern Ireland, and Wales to at least 2027, while Scotland's scheme has faced its own share of setbacks .

These delays are frustrating, especially when you consider how well DRS has worked elsewhere. Countries like Germany and Norway have seen impressive recycling rates and reductions in litter since introducing their schemes. Ireland's system, launched in November 2022, has already shown positive results. So, what's holding the UK back? These continual postponements suggest a lack of urgency and commitment, casting doubt on the government's genuine intent to tackle plastic waste.

The Propaganda Problem

Public awareness has soared, and companies are increasingly keen to flaunt their green credentials. But how much of this is genuine, and how much is just good PR?

Many companies have jumped on the eco-bandwagon, boasting about their use of recycled – or recyclable - materials or their commitment to sustainability. But if you dig a little deeper, these claims often lack substance. Claiming a product is 'recyclable' when the reality is that there are no facilities to make that recycling a reality, is just plain "greenwashing". It's a superficial attempt to appear environmentally friendly without making significant changes.

A Call for Genuine Change

If the UK is serious about reducing its reliance on virgin plastic, it needs to put its money where its mouth is. This means re-evaluating fossil fuel subsidies and investing more heavily in plastic recycling infrastructure. It also means setting more ambitious targets for recycled content and holding companies accountable for meeting them.

Moreover, innovation should be encouraged. There are exciting developments in bioplastics and alternative materials that could help reduce our virgin plastic footprint. Supporting these innovations financially and legislatively could drive the market away from virgin plastics more effectively than any tax could.

Conclusion

So, is the UK's intent to reduce virgin plastic use genuine? The jury's still out. There are positive signs, but they're often overshadowed by the ongoing support for fossil fuels and the economic realities of recycling infrastructure. For now, it seems we're stuck in a cycle of rhetoric and half-measures.

To break this cycle, we need more than just propaganda and token gestures. We need comprehensive policies, substantial investment, and a genuine commitment to change. Only then can we hope to move towards a more sustainable future.

****Sources:****

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