

Single-use plastics pledge 2019 - FAQs

This document summarises the frequently asked questions for the NHS plastics pledge launched in Autumn 2019. Details on the pledge itself are available [here](#).

General pledge and product questions

1. What do we mean by exemptions for those with “a specific need”?

Some people may need to use a plastic straw for medical reasons. Catering services on NHS premises should not display single-use plastic straws but should be able to provide them upon request. Those requesting a plastic straw do not need to give the reason why. Any marketing materials used to promote or explain the pledge should also make this clear.

2. Why are we introducing this pledge?

The [NHS Long Term Plan](#) made several firm commitments to protect the environment for health, including reducing the NHS contribution to air pollution, climate change and single-use plastics.

Producing plastic is a carbon intensive process and waste from plastic products has a significant impact on the environmentⁱ. As an environmental pollutant plastic takes a long time to break down and can persist in the environment as microplastics. We do not yet know the potential impact of plastics in the environment on human health, but the issue was raised recently by the World Health Organizationⁱⁱ: *“Based on the limited information we have, microplastics in drinking water don’t appear to pose a health risk at current levels. But we need to find out more. We also need to stop the rise in plastic pollution worldwide”*

As one of the UK’s largest procurers and consumers of goods the NHS has a responsibility to act wisely in how we use resources and dispose of waste. This pledge forms part of a wider programme to improve the environmental sustainability of the NHS, seeking to minimise the impact of our operations on human health and the environment for the benefit of current and future generations.



3. Why have you picked these products to start with?

These products are in the top 10 contributors of the plastic waste that accounts for 70% of all maritime litterⁱⁱⁱ. NHS Supply Chain data from 2015/16 indicates that catering products account for more than 5,600 tonnes of plastics procured. Most of these items are also easy to substitute with sustainable alternatives.

4. Why are you targeting expanded polystyrene or oxo-degradable plastics in particular?

Expanded polystyrene products form a large proportion of beach waste. This material is not currently easy to recycle. Similarly, oxo-biodegradable plastics do not 'biodegrade' but instead break down into micro-plastics that find their way into our eco-systems, are ingested by animals and contaminate our drinking water.

5. What should we replace these products with and which alternatives are most preferable?

In many cases, the most sustainable alternatives are those we use in our day to day lives at home and in the office: metal teaspoons (instead of stirrers), ceramic mugs or re-useable travel mugs, ceramic plates and metal cutlery. Where possible signatories to the pledge should consider how to encourage the use of these products. There may also be instances where the product need not be offered in the first place, unless requested, such as with plastic straws.

Where there are not obvious long-term re-usable alternatives, signatories should consider the least environmentally damaging material that can be used as an alternative. We consider this to be: FSC certified wooden products; or recyclable paper and cardboard alternatives and, where these materials are not available and composting facilities exist, fully bio-degradable plastics that decompose into carbon dioxide, biomass and water.

6. Where can we find alternative products?

Products purchased through [NHS Supply Chain](#) will automatically be compliant with the plastics pledge. Where you are using other suppliers, they should be able to direct you to suitable alternatives.

7. What if replacement products cost more?

Whilst some products may cost more, sites that have already removed single use plastics from their catering facilities have typically made cost savings overall as usage patterns change to reflect consumer preferences. The case studies on the main pledge page give more details of their experience.

Questions on data and signing the pledge

8. How do we submit data on the amount of plastic products we purchase?

Once you have signed the pledge, we will contact you with an email detailing how data can be submitted. It will be an online submission.

9. Will we receive reminders when to submit the data?

Yes, at the start of a data collection window, you will be sent a reminder and electronic link to submit the data.

10. What happens if we have already eliminated all the single use plastics concerned- do we still have to submit the data?

If you have eliminated all the single use plastic products listed in the pledge, you do not need to submit data. Please inform the plastics team: england.plastics@nhs.net

11. We already submit similar data to the SCS system, could you use that to identify product volumes?

We are currently investigating the possibility of using the SCS system to track catering product volumes. If this proves possible we will contact sites directly to inform them that a direct data submission is not required. However, not all organisations use this system and the data within SCS does not cover outsourced catering services (e.g. where your contracted catering supplier purchases single-use plastic items), so we are asking sites to submit data manually.

12. We outsource our catering to a third-party, can we still sign the pledge?

Yes. You will need to discuss this with your catering supplier and get them to agree to the contents of the pledge and then provide you with the appropriate data. Once they have agreed you can sign the pledge.

13. It is past the 31st October, can I still sign the pledge?

Yes, but please contact our plastics team directly at england.plastics@nhs.net

14. We are not an NHS organisation or close partner; can we still sign the pledge?

Unfortunately, at this stage the focus is on the NHS and our close partners, such as a supplier to the NHS or a retailer with a presence on NHS premises. However, there may be other similar initiatives in your area. See Manchester's [Plastic Free Pledge](#) for a good example.

15. What will you do with our data?

We will use your data to track the use of catering plastics in the NHS. While we may report percentage and volume reductions at a national and aggregate level, we will not release any individual site or supplier data.

16. How did you calculate the total volume of items used across the NHS?

NHS Supply Chain provides a significant proportion of the plastic catering products used in the NHS. We used their data to estimate the total volumes of catering products across the NHS. As this data does not cover *all* catering supplies, it is likely that our estimates are conservative.

Plastics and sustainability

17. What else will the NHS be doing to help eliminate avoidable single-use plastics?

While our initial focus is on catering plastics future aspects of this work will address supply chain, clinical and packaging plastics and examine waste and recycling systems in the NHS.

18. Is the NHS sustainability programme only focussing on single-use plastics? Where can I find out more about sustainability in the NHS?

The plastics pledge forms part of an integrated environmental sustainability programme in the NHS, following the commitments made in the NHS Long Term Plan. The NHS is undertaking a range of sustainable development initiatives for the benefit of current and future generations. You can find out more about these initiatives [here](#).

For further enquiries, please contact the plastics programme team at england.plastics@nhs.net

ⁱ https://ec.europa.eu/environment/waste/pdf/plastic_waste_factsheet.pdf

ⁱⁱ <https://www.who.int/news-room/detail/22-08-2019-who-calls-for-more-research-into-microplastics-and-a-crackdown-on-plastic-pollution>

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://ec.europa.eu/environment/circular-economy/pdf/plastics-strategy.pdf>