

P-06-1357 Draw up a new Microplastics Action Plan for Wales – Correspondence from the Petitioner to Committee, 22 January 2024

Dear Senedd Petitions Committee,

Many thanks for the opportunity to comment further on the Minister's latest response to our Microplastics petition and our request to them to facilitate an expert group in Wales to help draw up a new Microplastics Action Plan for Wales.

We would first like to acknowledge that Welsh Government has done, and is also doing, some good things around waste management, plastics and also microplastics, either at a Wales level or as part of wider UK level initiatives.

We would however also suggest that the Minister's delay in replying in detail, whilst she and her officials gather evidence from other departments, highlights our point exactly. Responsibility for different plans, strategies, work streams and initiatives which all have an impact on microplastics release, rests across many different Welsh Government Departments and Divisions. We would argue that the issue of microplastics is such an important one, both environmentally and also from a human health point of view, that a co-ordinated plan and approach are needed across Welsh Government that would allow the issue to be dealt with in a strategic and joined up way, rather than being left to a wide variety of different Departments and strategies to 'hopefully' cover most of the issues.

One key point that the Minister admits, and one which we know as result from Freedom of Information requests is that there is no statutory requirement to test for microplastics in water bodies in Wales. We would strongly suggest that this is of utmost importance to establish what exactly the scale of the problem is, where the microplastics are coming from and to therefore establish a baseline against which we can then test in future to see if we are being successful in reducing the release of microplastics to the environment in Wales.

A new Microplastics Action Plan for Wales would go a long way to ensure that this would be a part of a more joined up and thought through strategic look at microplastics and would establish targets and milestones and cross departmental working.

There are also some other key points to draw out of the Minister's response.

Again, we do of course welcome the positive initiatives and strategies that Welsh Government are working on but we would like to make the point very clearly that there are an awful lot of other things we feel that Welsh Government can do on microplastics. This is why an expert group of organisations such as Welsh Water, National Federation of Women's Institutes Wales and many others, as well as prominent academics active in the field in Wales would be of huge benefit in helping draw together a more comprehensive plan.

Just to highlight one or two, the Minister mentions fertilisers. We know through work Cardiff University has done (<https://www.cardiff.ac.uk/news/view/2623372-european-farmland-could-be-biggest-global-reservoir-of-microplastics,-study-suggests>) that farmland can contain huge amounts of microplastics derived from sewage sludge. Fertilisers are a devolved issue (Page 1 <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/61fa82c9d3bf7f78dc2cd9de/fertilisers-provisional-common-framework.pdf>) so we in Wales could develop our own

standards of testing and regulating microplastic content in sewage sludge applied to farm land in Wales for example. This may or may not be done anyway but again, further highlights the need for a wider ranging new Action Plan.

The announcement that schools will be encouraged to provide a school uniform swap shop to pupils throughout Wales is a very positive one which we campaigned for. We have, since the announcement was made, been trying to contact Welsh Government officials to follow up on this announcement to offer our help and enquire how exactly the scheme will work. We have yet to receive a response unfortunately.

The Minister's response also mentions community schemes which are all very positive and really good to see but there are also other community schemes which could be supported, trialled and scaled up to cover all of Wales such as the excellent Play it Again Sport scheme in RCT.

In our original recommendations report (<https://foe.cymru/sustainable-fashion>), we also highlight the type of support that Welsh SME sustainable fashion businesses would like to see offered. An action plan would allow some of these to also be considered as to how they are able to help reduce microplastic pollution.

We know for example that there is a wonderful opportunity in Wales to encourage the use of Welsh wool in sustainable fashion. Wool is a sustainable material and is produced in Wales, helping to sustain farming and rural economies and culture. We also know unfortunately that the wool industry has been struggling in recent years and needs help. Surely, part of some overall joined up thinking should be to look at how we can support farmers and the Welsh Wool industry to supply quality wool to sustainable fashion businesses and thereby create a win-win situation.

Another alternative material that needs to be investigated is Hemp. It can be grown in Wales, has a huge variety of positive uses and is an excellent sequester of CO₂ too. If we are being truly forward thinking, we should really be looking in to how we could support farmers to diversify into hemp if they wish and to then supply that hemp to sustainable fashion businesses in Wales. It is all part of the same issue as these alternative materials don't in turn then release plastic microfibrils.

The Minister also mentions that they have trialled an end-of-life fishing gear scheme. This was a trial in 6 harbours (<https://businesswales.gov.wales/marineandfisheries/information-and-statistics/marine-litter#:~:text=End%20of%20life%20fishing%20gear%20scheme,associated%20with%20applicable%20gear%20types>). Whilst this is obviously a great initiative, it is important that this is rolled out further across Wales, beyond the original 6 harbours, and supported. Again, this is exactly why an overarching Microplastics Action Plan is needed to help bring together all the findings, set targets and assess success rates in a joined-up way alongside all the other strategies and initiatives. Otherwise it risks being a stand-alone piece of work.

Lastly, we would like to again make the point that microplastics (and nano plastics) are increasingly found in humans with associated health concerns (<https://weather.com/science/environment/news/2024-01-19-some-microplastics-travel-farther-in-atmosphere>), (<https://www.washingtonpost.com/climate-solutions/2024/01/12/microplastics-fish-chicken-tofu-protein/>),

(<https://www.newscientist.com/article/2412529-fertilisers-are-a-major-source-of-microplastic-pollution-in-soil/>), (<https://www.independent.co.uk/climate-change/news/plastic-pollution-food-fish-meat-b2476377.html>), ([Doctor says he won't drink bottled water over plastic health fears - Wales Online](#)).

In fact, there are now just so many news articles, stories and academic studies on the issue that national governments need to realise the scale of the issue and work in a more co-ordinated way when assessing and planning for all the various solutions.

This is probably THE key issue - as it is such a constantly and quickly evolving area of work, having an expert group of Welsh academics, relevant organisations and others, helping bring together all the latest evidence and helping formulate longer term strategies and plans across a wide range of different areas, would surely be a common sense and timely initiative?

We realise that Welsh Government are short on capacity but an expert group could really help in this regard and help with the necessary work.

Given the obvious scale of the problem, we feel that asking Welsh Government to facilitate a new expert group on microplastics and asking them to work with Welsh Government on a new co-ordinated Microplastics Action Plan is both a relevant, timely and proportionate ask.

Yours sincerely

On behalf of Sustainable Clothing and Textiles Cymru