

P-06-1357 Draw up a new Microplastics Action Plan for Wales, Correspondence – Petitioner to Committee, 19.09.23

Dear Jack Sargeant MS and the Senedd Petitions Committee,

Many thanks for considering our petition 'Draw up a new Microplastics Action Plan for Wales'.

We would like to add the following information for your consideration.

We (Sustainable Clothing and Textiles Cymru) are a coalition (members include Sustainable Fashion Wales, Friends of the Earth Cymru, Repair Café Wales, the Eco-schools programme Keep Wales Tidy and Welsh sustainable fashion label Onesta, amongst others), brought together to look into all the various aspects of sustainable fashion in Wales and to highlight the issues and recommend solutions. We have produced a [document highlighting all these various recommendations](#) and presented it to Welsh Government at the start of this year.

One of the issues that we highlight in our recommendations report is the one on plastic microfibres being released from synthetic clothes when they are washed. This is an issue that has been raised before by the National Federation of Women's Institutes in their excellent '[End Plastic Soup](#)' report.

Obviously these plastic microfibres are then part of a wider issue of microplastic pollution and one we believe should be addressed in more detail here in Wales.

Our recommendation, specifically, is that Welsh Government facilitate the bringing together of an expert group in Wales who can then help draw up a new **Microplastics Action Plan for Wales**. We already have many experts on the issues in Wales, from prominent academics to organisations like Dŵr Cymru and NRW, National Federation Women's Institutes Wales, NGO's and other individuals.

We believe this approach, to facilitate the bringing together of an expert group would ensure all the different sources of microplastic pollution are discussed and investigated and that all relevant solutions are included in a new Action Plan.

We hope that the Senedd Petitions Committee will support this recommendation.

Further information

Microplastics are particles of plastic below 5mm in size (thinner than a human hair) and come from a variety of different sources.

Worldwide, around 70 million barrels of oil a year are used to make polyester fibres in our clothes. Washing some clothes, meanwhile, releases about 500,000 tons of microfibres into our oceans each year (the equivalent of roughly 50 billion plastic bottles!).

Astonishingly, plastic microfibres washed off from synthetic clothes are estimated to make up about 35% of the entire plastic pollution in our seas and oceans. The majority of these microfibres are released the first few times a piece of clothing is washed.

Washing machines and wastewater treatment plants aren't designed to trap the minute plastic fibres that our clothes shed during washing. Many of these fibres sneak into our waterways and ultimately the oceans. And lots are caught up in sludge at the treatment plants – which is then sprayed over our soils as fertiliser.

Microplastics are now ubiquitous in the environment and evidence already exists of their presence in the food chain and the adverse effects on animals. Microplastic fragments have also now been found in the blood in 8 out of 10 people with as yet unknown health effects.

Open Letter

In July 2023 we organised an [Open Letter](#) to Welsh Government signed by over 50 organisations including Dŵr Cymru, WWF Cymru, NFWI Wales, Cynnal Cymru, CPRW, Eryri National Park, National Trust and Wildlife Trusts Wales.

Our ask was simply that Welsh Government now convene an expert group to come together to look at the issues of microplastics in Wales, all their various sources, and to then recommend a suite of solutions.

Welsh Government response to the Senedd Petitions Committee

We note Welsh Government's response both to your communication with Minister for Climate Change Julie James MS and also in similar correspondence we have received from her following the publication of the Open Letter. We agree that Welsh Government are doing some very good things on waste and plastics issues that will help reduce the amount of microplastics entering our environment but there are also a great many other things that need to be done that Welsh Government isn't doing which an expert group is best placed to advise on.

Bringing together an expert group

We feel this way of going about things is the correct one in this instance as we realise that the Senedd's legislative calendar is already very full and that there is also a certain lack of capacity within the relevant governmental departments.

Precedent

Welsh Government have brought together groups such as this before, one recent example being to look at phosphorous pollution in Welsh rivers (<https://www.gov.wales/first-minister-hosts-summit-solutions-river-pollution>).

Another interesting and relevant group is the Wales Clean Seas Partnership whose remit has been to help draw up a Marine Litter Action Plan for Wales.

(<https://businesswales.gov.wales/marineandfisheries/information-and-statistics/wales-clean-seas-partnership>)

As the sources of microplastics are wide ranging and are both terrestrial and marine, we feel a new expert group is desperately needed to deal with both the sources and solutions to the problems.

There are many academics, experts and organisations in Wales who are already working on the issue of microplastics and they are willing to support any new expert group so we feel our request to Welsh Government is both proportional and also timely and relevant.

Issues not covered by the Minister's response that we feel are important to consider:

Microplastic pollution of farmland

To highlight why we feel we need a new Microplastics Action Plan here in Wales, [Cardiff University scientists](#) have found quite staggering amounts of microplastics present in sewage sludge that is then spread on farmers' fields.

They conclude that 'Farmlands across Europe are potentially the biggest global reservoir of microplastics due to the high concentrations found in fertilisers derived from sewage sludge'. shown.

They estimate that *'between 31,000 and 42,000 tonnes of microplastics (or 86 – 710 trillion microplastic particles) are applied to European soils annually, mirroring the concentration of microplastics found in ocean surface waters.'*

'In a study published in the journal [Environmental Pollution](#), the team estimate that microplastics removed from raw sewage at wastewater treatment plants go on to make up roughly 1% of the weight of sewage sludge, which is commonly used as a fertiliser on farms across Europe.

The UK was shown to potentially have the highest amount of microplastic contamination in its soils, with 500 – 1000 microplastic particles per square meter of agricultural land applied per year, followed by Spain, Portugal and Germany.'

Lack of testing for microplastics in Wales

Bearing in mind the above study, as a coalition we have over the last few months submitted Freedom of Information requests to find out if any testing is currently being done for microplastics in watercourses in Wales. The responses we received showed that no testing was currently being done. This is not in any way a criticism of the organisations involved, merely an example of the changes we are seeking. We surely need to know the scale of the problem so we can help devise a comprehensive Action Plan to deal with it all.

We know that Dŵr Cymru for instance are very concerned about wet wipes continually being flushed into the sewer system. As well as the issues of blockages and 'fat bergs', these wipes, if plastic based, will shed microplastic particles. Therefore, future action on wet wipes might be an area for an expert group to make recommendations.

Washing machines

We know that synthetic clothes shed an incredible amount of plastic microfibres when washed, especially during the first few washes. This issue in itself highlights the many cross overs between issues and is one of the main reasons we as a coalition are now looking at the issue of microplastics in general and not just clothing plastic microfibres.

Indeed, France have just enacted legislation that by 2025 every new washing machine must have a filter to catch plastic microfibres that come away from clothing during washing.

<https://www.oceancleanwash.org/2020/02/france-is-leading-the-fight-against-plastic-microfibers/>

Whilst action such as this would not be in the legislative competence of the Welsh Senedd, actions such as this are desperately needed and one action that might be recommended by an expert group would be that the Welsh Government work with the other UK administrations to enact similar legislation in the UK.

Education sector

It isn't just the obvious examples of solutions either that will need to be considered.

For instance, we also lobbied Welsh Government to introduce school uniform swap shops in all schools in Wales. Happily, they agreed to roll that out but even in education, there remains a lot more that could be done from more education around the issues of sustainable fashion to ensuring students can adequately mend their own clothes which would help cut down on the throwaway culture we find ourselves in. The less clothes we throw away, the less we need to buy, which in turn helps reduce both microplastics pollution if these clothes are synthetic but also then reduces climate

emissions and a whole host of other environmental problems such as other sources of pollution and land and water use.

Community enterprises

Allied to the above example, we feel that there is the possibility of rolling out the very successful [‘Play it Again Sport’](#) scheme in RCT to other parts of Wales. Play it Again Sport rescues sports kits and equipment from landfill and then sells them back to the community at heavily reduced prices. This helps to knock down the financial barriers stopping people participating in sport and improves physical health and mental wellbeing.

Again, this is a different sort of solution but one that also reduces microplastic release from clothes but also then has a wide variety of other social and community benefits but that isn’t covered by current Welsh Government plans and strategies.

Community actions such as this fall in the remit of Welsh Government and their inclusion in a wide ranging and overarching Action Plan would really position us in Wales as being forward thinking and willing to join up different aspects and sectors.

Business support and alternative materials

Again, these areas may not at first glance seem to be linked to microplastic pollution but increased business support for small sustainable fashion businesses in Wales could help Wales achieve an ambition of becoming a sustainable fashion hub with all the benefits that would have for our economy and for jobs in local communities.

The use of alternative materials such as wool and possibly even hemp are also potentially part of the solution here in Wales, especially immediately with wool. The wool industry in Wales is really struggling but wool is obviously a sustainable material and a joined-up approach between wool producers and sustainable fashion producers in Wales could help be part of the wider solution.

Similarly, an initiative with farming unions and businesses in Wales to investigate the benefits of hemp farming to the rural economy could also reap many long-term benefits given the nature of hemp as a bit of a wonder crop with it’s vast carbon sequestration potential as well as the ability to grow in virtually any soil, even heavily degraded soil, without the need for fertilisers and pesticides. A huge variety of products can be made from hemp including textiles and even bio plastics.

Other sources of plastic

Whilst we very much welcome the good work done by Welsh Government in moving to a circular economy, on banning certain single use plastics and pushing ahead with the Deposit Return Scheme, there are however still many other sources of plastic pollution that need to be addressed. Some of these larger plastic items themselves break down into smaller and smaller pieces of plastic over the course of time ending up as microplastics. Examples in the marine environment include marine coatings, plastic fishing nets and larger plastic items such as bottles and bags. Other surprising source are car tyres and paints on buildings and roads.

Conclusion

We feel an expert group of academics and organisations in Wales, working with Welsh Government would be able to help identify all the various sources of microplastic pollution and help propose solutions via a new **Microplastic Action Plan for Wales**. We hope you agree.