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# Disposable coffee cups: How big a problem are they for the environment?



Latte levy: The plastic problem inside your coffee cup

In a report released on Friday, the Environmental Audit Committee has set out a strategy for the UK to deal with the waste **resulting** from the British public's love of takeaway coffee.

Awareness has grown in recent years of the issues surrounding **plastic waste**, which includes polyethylene-lined disposable coffee cups.

**Chancellor Philip Hammond** expressed support for charges on single-use plastics **in his November Budget**.

Now, after a recent call from the committee to introduce a deposit return scheme for plastic bottles, the group of MPs has looked into the specific problems associated with disposable coffee cups.



Following its investigation, the committee is calling on the Government to introduce a 25p “latte levy” on disposable coffee cups, and for all coffee cups to be recycled by 2023.

If the 2023 target is not met, the committee said the Government should ban disposable coffee cups outright.

In the UK we use 7 million disposable coffee cups every day – that’s 2.5 billion every year.

But the problems with coffee cups go beyond their sheer numbers.

### **Misconceptions surrounding recycling**

Perhaps the biggest issue with disposable coffee cups is the disconnect between their alleged recyclability and the rate at which they are actually recycled.

Cups are technically recyclable, something that some coffee companies actively promote on their packaging.

However, due to the complicated way in which they are produced, the vast majority of coffee cups do not end up being recycled.

### **DISPOSABLE COFFEE CUPS – IN NUMBERS**

- UK throws away 2.5 billion disposable coffee cups every year
- Less than 1 per cent of coffee cups are recycled
- Half a million cups are littered every day
- Packaging producers only pay for 10 per cent of the cost of packaging disposal and recycling

Though they are made largely of paper, disposable coffee cups are lined with plastic polyethylene, which is tightly bonded to the paper making the cups waterproof and therefore able to contain liquid.

In addition, the difficulty of recycling coffee cups is increased by the fact they are contaminated with drink.

This means cups cannot be recycled at standard recycling plants, and must instead be taken to special facilities – only three of which exist in the UK.

The reality is that less than 1 per cent of coffee cups ever end being recycled.

### **Problematic materials**

Unrecycled plastic takes hundreds of years to break down, meaning lots of it ends up impacting the natural environment.

Gradual breakdown of plastics results in **tiny “microplastics”** that can be ingested by animals, and chemicals that are potentially toxic for various creatures, including us.

The success of *Blue Planet II* has drawn the public’s attention to the problem of plastic pollution in the marine environment, the full scale of which scientists are only now beginning to understand.

While plastic is a major concern, the paper component of coffee cups is not without its environmental harms either.

Many paper cups that are downed and disposed of are made from virgin paper pulp.

That means trees must be felled to produce a product that only ends up being used for the length of time it takes to drink a latte.

Add to this the carbon footprint of coffee cup manufacturing and distribution for these single-use items, and it is clear that disposable coffee cups in their entirety have a major impact on the environment.

This is why one of the committee's recommendations is for coffee chains to promote the use of reusable cups by offering incentives to customers, such as **Pret A Manger's 50p discount** for those who bring their own mug.

Raising awareness of the nature of disposable coffee cups is important, but one of the report's key recommendations is that companies must take responsibility for the impact of their cups.

By setting into motion the mechanisms to prevent the use of these coffee cups, the Government could pave the way for policy that prevents the misuse or indeed use of all non-recyclable products.

**More about:** [Recycling](#) [Environmental Audit Committee](#) [Latte Levy](#) [Cut The Cup Waste](#)