

Single-use plastic bans: Research shows three ways to make them effective

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Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

Governments around the world are introducing single-use plastic product bans to alleviate pollution.

Zimbabwe banned [plastic packaging](#) and bottles as early as [2010](#).
Antigua and Barbuda banned [single-use catering and takeaway items](#) in

2016, and the Pacific island of Vanuatu did the same for [disposable containers in 2018](#).

The EU prohibited cotton buds, balloon sticks, [plastic catering items and takeaway containers](#), including those made from expanded polystyrene, [in 2021](#).

The UK government has followed suit by announcing a ban on the supply of [single-use](#) plastic plates, cutlery, balloon sticks, and polystyrene cups and containers supplied to restaurants, cafes and takeaways in England. The measure will start in April 2023. The same products sold in supermarkets and shops will be exempt from the ban, but subject to new regulations expected in 2024.

While the forthcoming ban is a step in the right direction, the production, use and disposal of plastics typically spans several countries and continents. The success of any policy aimed at restricting the use of plastic products in one country should not be taken for granted.

Our research continues to highlight that policies which influence what consumers buy, such as bans, taxes or charges, lack the reach to confront [the global scale of pollution](#). The effect of banning single-use plastic items is limited to the jurisdiction in which it is implemented, unless it inspires a wider shift in public or commercial behavior across international boundaries.

Without supporting measures, or by failing to treat the ban as the beginning of a broader phase-down of plastic, banning some items does little to change the attitudes which reinforce a [throwaway culture](#).

The [Global Plastics Policy Center](#) of the University of Portsmouth [reviewed 100 policies](#) aimed at tackling plastic pollution worldwide in 2022 to understand what makes them successful. Here are three key

lessons which can make the new English ban more effective.

1. Make it easy to use alternatives

Consumers and businesses are less likely to comply with a ban if they are expected to go entirely without plastic overnight. Ensuring businesses can source affordable alternatives is critical. Antigua and Barbuda did this by investing in the research of more sustainable materials and listing approved alternatives to plastic, such as [bagasse](#), a byproduct of sugar-cane processing.

To maintain [public support](#), it helps if there are measures which prevent cost hikes being passed directly on to consumers.

Alternative materials or products must have a lower environmental impact than the banned product, but this isn't always guaranteed. Substituting plastic bags for paper, for example, may not be the best idea when the entire life cycle of a [product](#) is accounted for.

2. Phase in a ban

A phased approach to a ban improves how well it works but requires consistent and clear messaging about what products are banned and when. In Antigua and Barbuda, phased plastic bag bans in 2016 and 2017 generated [support for banning other plastic products](#) between 2017 and 2018.

In both cases, importing these products was restricted first, followed by a ban on distributing them, which gave suppliers time to find alternatives and use up existing stock.

This approach was used to good effect in an English ban on plastic

straws, cotton buds and stirrers in 2020, allowing retailers to use up their supplies during the [six months](#) following the ban's introduction.

3. Involve the public

Information campaigns which explain why a ban is needed, what it means for the public and businesses and what alternatives are available serve to support a ban. This was evident from Vanuatu, where the inclusion of diapers in a ban was [postponed](#) due to [public concerns](#) around the availability of sustainable alternatives.

Working closely with the public like this can also encourage innovation. For example, in Vanuatu in 2018, weavers and [crafting communities](#) filled the gap left by banned [plastic bags](#) and polystyrene takeaway containers with natural alternatives made locally, including bags and food containers woven from palm leaves.

Single-use plastic bans can inspire wider changes to [social systems](#) and the relationship each person has with plastic. But without planned access to alternatives, a phased introduction, efforts to nurture public support and broader consideration of the entire life cycle of plastic, product bans have a limited effect on plastic pollution, and can even give the false impression of progress.

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