

Joint Committee for Communications, Climate Action and the Environment

17th January 2018

Detailed scrutiny of the Waste Reduction Bill 2017, Private Members Bill

Opening Statement from the Environmental Protection Agency

Introduction

The EPA's mission is to protect and improve the environment as a valuable asset for the people of Ireland and to protect against the harmful effects of radiation and pollution. A substantial area of the EPA's activity in achieving that mission is the collection and statutory reporting of national waste statistics and the development and implementation of the National Waste Prevention Programme.

National Waste Statistics

The Waste Reduction Bill proposes to target waste streams that are classified as 'packaging waste'. The EPA reports national statistics on this waste stream on an annual basis to the European Commission. In 2015, 983,384 tonnes of packaging waste was generated in Ireland¹ with packaging waste making up about 1/3 of total municipal waste generated. Packaging is made from materials such as plastic, cardboard, paper, glass, steel, aluminium, wood and textile. Packaging made of composite (two or more) materials is also frequently used, for example, in coffee cups, milk and juice cartons.

Of these packaging materials, plastics comprised 29% of total packaging waste, 84% of which is recycled or recovered through waste incineration. Paper & board made up 41% of packaging waste and 99% of this waste stream is recycled or recovered. For further information, we refer the Committee to the EPA's new waste statistics platform on our website.

Ireland currently meets its statutory recycling targets for waste packaging but future targets envisaged in the EU's 'Circular Economy Package' will likely prove far more challenging. For example, while Ireland recycled 34% of plastic packaging waste in 2015¹ and exceeded the EU target of 22.5%, the current proposals in the Circular Economy Package call for 55% of plastic packaging to be recycled or prepared for reuse by 2025. While Ireland has made progress in improving recycling and recovery levels, further progress is needed to protect the environment, meet incoming EU regulations and facilitate the move to a circular economy in Ireland.

¹ <http://www.epa.ie/nationalwastestatistics/packaging/>

The EPA is continually refining and developing national waste statistics. In this regard, we are currently completing a new comprehensive waste characterisation project that will include estimates of the quantity of disposable cups in municipal waste. The project will report during 2018 and provide more definitive statistics on this waste stream.

EPA Observations on Waste Reduction Bill 2017

It is important that waste policy is guided by the waste hierarchy which accords highest priority to waste prevention followed by preparing for reuse, recycling and energy recovery with disposal being the least desirable option. Ireland's National Waste Prevention Programme was established in 2004 and is led by the EPA. In this context, the EPA welcomes innovative new measures that will increase resource use efficiency and waste prevention including actions to reduce the use of disposable items. In addition, any measures that reduce societal littering are welcomed.

We recognise that there are a range of options available to minimise single-use items and we should seek to be innovative and efficient. Ireland, for example, has pioneered economic initiatives which have changed consumer behaviour and prevented waste (e.g. the plastic bag levy). In addition, a range of successful Extended Producer Responsibility Schemes are operational in Ireland. We would welcome further research on the cost-effectiveness and practicalities of the different options available to reduce and prevent single-use materials.

This research could also include an analysis of how the proposed deposit/return scheme would interface with existing systems such as the packaging Producer Responsibility Scheme operated by Repak. In addition, the current bottle bank facilities for glass bottles have been very successful in supporting behaviour change in relation to the management of this resource material and research could address whether it is more effective to extend this model to other materials. Ireland's recycling rate for glass stood at 88% in 2015¹, above the EU average and comparable with countries where deposit/return schemes are already in operation.

In relation to terminology, we note that the Bill, as currently drafted, refers specifically to plastic cups whereas composite coffee cups, comprising both paper and plastic components, give rise to an even greater difficulty with regard to recycling and these items might usefully be taken into consideration should the Bill be progressed.

Finally, the EPA is keen to highlight the challenges that lie ahead in terms of self-sufficiency of waste management including recyclables. Ireland is currently heavily reliant on export markets for the treatment of recyclable wastes. Any efforts to increase the management of these waste streams should

include proactive planning for adequate future treatment capacity in the State which is an important step in a move to circular economy and will support extracting more value from our waste here in Ireland.

Conclusion

EPA welcomes innovation in relation to promoting resource efficiency and positive behaviour change in support of a more sustainable society and economy - where those innovations can be shown to be effective and to interface positively with existing successful measures. We will continue to support the evidence base and inform policy in this area through the publication of timely and accessible national waste statistics and through the implementation of Ireland's National Waste Prevention Programme.