

Marine Conservation Society Policy Paper on: Deposit Return Schemes

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Geographical Context: UK

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Drinks-related litter was found on 96% of UK beaches surveyed by Beachwatch volunteers in 2024. We are therefore calling on the governments of the UK to;

1. Introduce Deposit Return Schemes by October 2027 for plastic and metal drinks containers
2. Ensure circular solutions for glass to be put in place in each nation via a Deposit Return Scheme or other Extended Producer Responsibility Scheme as soon as possible and prioritising reuse
3. Design the Deposit Return Schemes with the infrastructure to move to reuse and refill schemes in the future

Introduction

The Marine Conservation Society has been campaigning for Deposit Return Schemes for bottles and cans for almost a decade. This tried and tested policy in countries across the world reduces litter and increases recycling and is an important stepping stone towards a circular economy. Beachwatch data has consistently highlighted the extent of drinks-related litter on our beaches, demonstrating the need to urgently introduce comprehensive and inter-operable Deposit Return Schemes across the UK.

What is a Deposit Return Scheme?

You pay a small deposit on top of the price of a drink, which you get back when you return the empty drinks container to a collection point located in places such as supermarkets or shops.

Deposit Return Schemes (DRS) are tried and tested, running successfully in more than 50 nations worldwide. In Germany, the DRS has achieved [return rates of 98%](#), with every shop required to take bottles back. Similarly, 93% of bottles and cans purchased were returned through Finland's DRS.

Why do we need a Deposit Return Scheme?

Our State of Beaches 2024 report revealed that 96% of beaches surveyed in the UK were polluted with bottles and cans. These items spoil our beaches – and strong Deposit Return Schemes that are designed to be compatible across the UK have the potential to reduce drinks-related litter on our beaches.

By placing a value on what is often seen as worthless, Deposit Return Schemes incentivise people to recycle their own drinks containers and pick up littered containers. This would have a huge effect in reducing littering.

A recent report by Reloop showed that countries with Deposit Return Schemes had less drinks related litter than countries withoutⁱ. The first litter survey on Irish beaches since the Ireland Deposit Return Scheme started has also shown a 30% drop in drinks related litterⁱⁱ.

A Deposit Return Scheme also has wider societal benefits including a potential saving of £11 billion from the social cost of litter, higher recycling rates and greenhouse gas reductionsⁱⁱⁱ.

Implementing ambitious Deposit Return Schemes would also be an important step towards a more circular economy. A circular economy is one where waste is minimised by keeping products and materials in use for as long as possible, through a combination of recycling, reuse and regeneration.

Case Studies

Danish Deposit Return Scheme

Date started: 23/09/2002

Materials included: plastic, metal and glass

Return rates: 92% in 2023

Reuse: 11% market share in refillables in 2023

What we can learn from Denmark:

Bulk return stations

As well as having a return to retailer model where consumers can use reverse vending machines in stores or use manual take back options, the Danish DMO has also opened up bulk return stations. Between 85,000 to 200,000 returns are made every day at one of these return centres. Consumers can empty bags or boxes all at onetime rather than inputting bottles and cans one by one at reverse vending machines. There is an app consumers download and the deposits are then put straight into their account, rather than a voucher system used by retailers to encourage consumers to spend their deposits in store.

The bulk return centres accept all materials plus refillable glass. Any containers that do not have deposits (such as those from other countries) are also accepted and sorted for recycling.

Education and Engagement

The Danish processing plants have been designed to include opportunities for education and engagement. At one near Copenhagen a corridor was incorporated into building design to include windows into the processing plant in the walls and on the floor to show safely how the bottles and cans are sorted and processed. Along the corridor there were plenty of

informative panels plus interactive games to show how the DRS worked, from using magnets to sort material to a fun game to clean up the environment. At least one school a week visits the centre to learn about the DRS.

Latvian Deposit Return Scheme

Date started: 1/02/2022

Materials included: plastic, metal and glass

Return rates: 85%

Reuse: Targets for reuse set for glass and 15% market share for refillables in 2024

What we can learn from Latvia:

Charity donations

The Latvian DMO has raised over a million Euros for charities since their donation scheme started in 2023. Consumers have the option at reverse vending machines to either claim their deposit or donate it to one of four different charities.

Recommendations for UK Deposit Management Organisation:

1. Look at developing plans for Bulk Return Stations so consumers can return bottles and cans in bulk – similar to how we used to use bottle banks.
2. Ensure education and engagement is considered in the planning of infrastructure and include options for learning such as safe corridors and windows into processing plants for educational purposes.
3. Include charity donations as part of the scheme with options for consumers to choose which charity they would like to donate their deposit to.

References

- I. <https://www.reloopplatform.org/confirmation-deposit-return-systems-drastically-reduce-litter/>
- II. <https://ibal.ie/cleaner-coasts-significant-improvement-in-irelands-beaches-and-waterways/>
- III. <https://www.reloopplatform.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/Public-opinion-research-on-DRS-May24.pdf>

ⁱ <https://www.reloopplatform.org/confirmation-deposit-return-systems-drastically-reduce-litter/>

ⁱⁱ <https://ibal.ie/cleaner-coasts-significant-improvement-in-irelands-beaches-and-waterways/>

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.reloopplatform.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/Public-opinion-research-on-DRS-May24.pdf>