



WWF-UK SINGLE-USE PLASTIC REPORT

JANUARY 2020



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“We know too well the horror plastics are causing in our oceans. We collectively commit to cutting out all single-use plastic that we knowingly can in our operations, products and supply chain across the UK by 2020.”

Tanya Steele, chief executive (2017)

This report details the progress we’re making towards meeting our commitment.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

BACKGROUND

Plastic pollution has become the most visible example of the havoc we're causing to our planet, and it's getting worse. It's a particular problem for our oceans, as every year eight million tonnes of plastic are dumped into the sea.¹ Nearly all plastics are made from fossil fuels, so their production contributes to climate change. Plastic never biodegrades in the natural environment, instead it breaks down into tiny 'microplastics' which end up in our oceans. These microplastics attract toxic chemicals, are ingested by wildlife, and end up in our food chain. Larger pieces of plastic pose an ingestion hazard to wildlife too.



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Unlike materials such as aluminium, most plastics are not infinitely recyclable. Instead, plastics are 'down-cycled' rather than recycled; they are made into lower grade products which are eventually no longer recyclable. Globally, only 9% of plastic is recycled².

At WWF, we're seeking long-term solutions to many global threats to nature. Our mission is to create a world where people and wildlife thrive together; we strive to do this by working with civil society, governments and corporations to find constructive ways to tackle the problems.

Practising what we preach plays an important role within this, including our efforts to reduce plastic pollution. In November 2017, our chief executive Tanya Steele announced:

"We will end the use of single-use plastics in our operations, products and supply chain across the UK that we knowingly can by 2020."

We define single-use plastic as any disposable plastic item that's designed to be used only once, or for a short-term purpose, before being thrown away or recycled.

We began our efforts by distributing a survey about single-use plastic to all staff, to identify areas of plastic use. Using this data, we developed an action plan to tackle these areas –

¹ www.unenvironment.org/interactive/beat-plastic-pollution/

²

www.researchgate.net/publication/318567844 Production use and fate of all plastics ever made

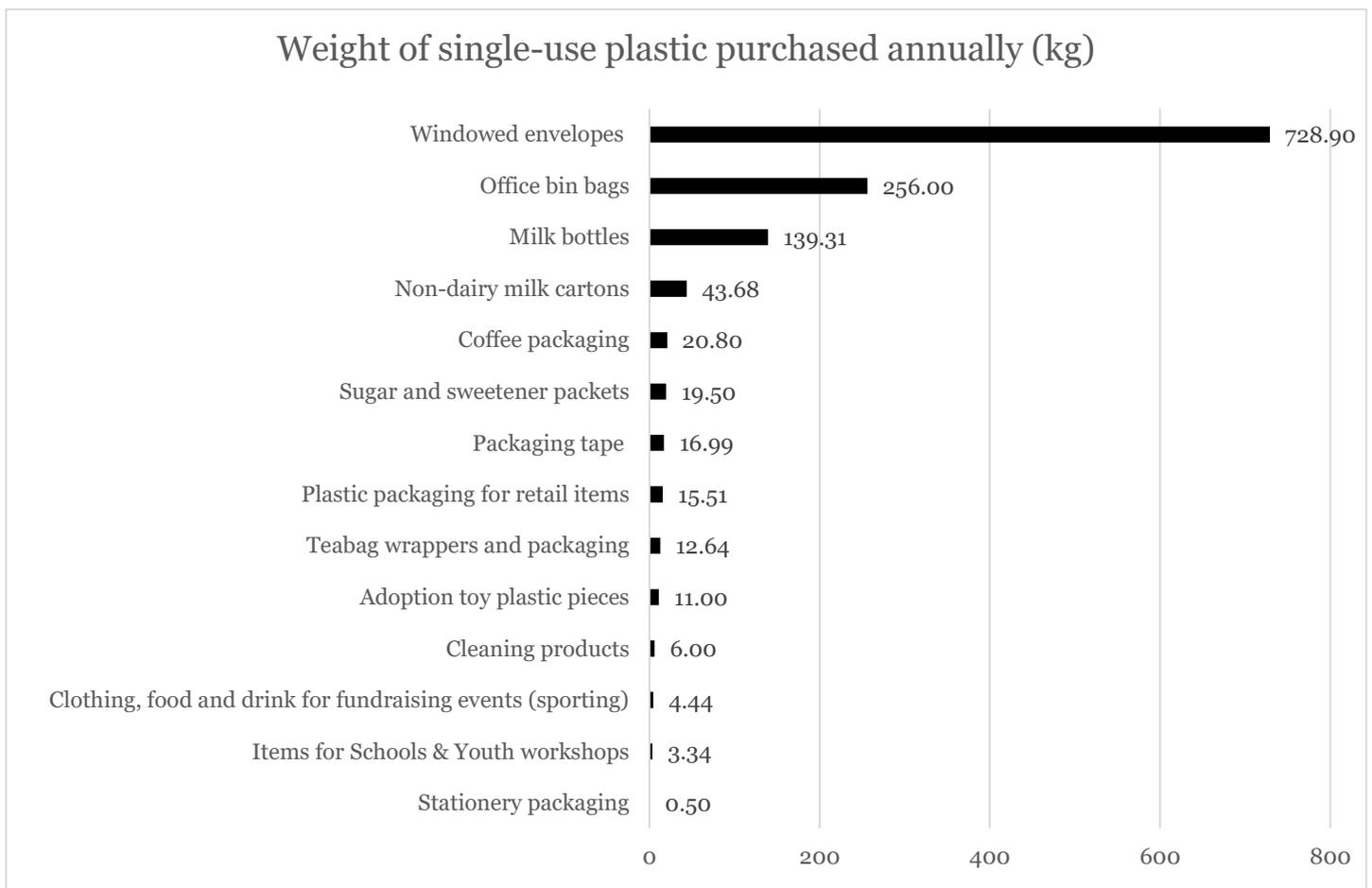


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focusing on suppliers, products and purchasing by staff. To prevent further purchases of disposable plastics we implemented a single-use plastic policy, guiding staff on what they can and cannot buy. We provided a hierarchy of alternatives staff should work through, including the best plastic to choose where these cannot be avoided. This policy came into effect in April 2018.

On average, we were using 1,279kg of single-use plastics annually. Our most common single-use plastic items appeared in our communications to supporters and our business operations – predominantly windowed envelopes, bin bags and office refreshments.

Weight of single-use plastic purchased annually (kg)



We've reduced the single-use plastic content of our communications by working with our print management company to redesign envelopes, removing plastic-windows from most of our mailings. This saved around 700kg of single-use plastic a year.



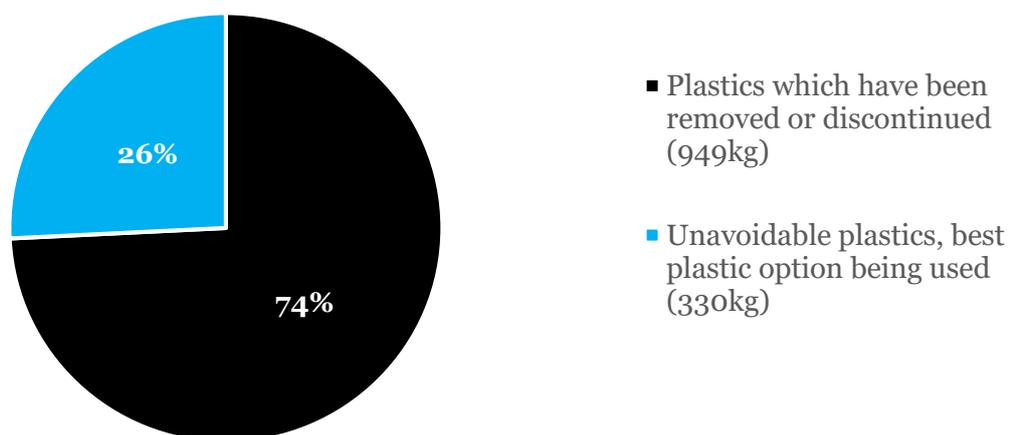
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Within our business operations we swapped several items for plastic-free alternatives. Non-recyclable sugar and sweetener packets were removed and replaced with recyclable cardboard packaging and glass jars, and we switched our single-use plastic milk bottles to reusable glass bottles, delivered by a milkman. In some cases, we were unable to identify more sustainable alternatives to existing plastic packaging. We address this by moving to larger, bulk packs to reduce the amount of plastic disposed of – for instance changing our coffee from 60g portioned packets to 500g bags.

Throughout our journey we've applied the waste hierarchy – remove (remove unnecessary items), reduce (reduce the quantity required), reuse (replace with a reusable alternative), and recycle (selecting an item or packaging that is from a renewable and recyclable source). Where we've been unable to remove a single-use plastic item, we've found the best alternative plastic solution.

Despite challenges, we've managed to meet our commitment. We've removed all avoidable single-use plastic from WWF-UK. This equates to 949kg of 1,279kg used every year by our organisation. The remaining 330kg is unavoidable at present. With developments in environmentally friendly products and packaging happening at such a fast rate, it's our ambition to continue to remove these plastics in future.

Results



The items which make up the 26% of single-use plastics which are unavoidable at present include: filter coffee pouches, alternative milk cartons, packaging for retail items, bin bags, windowed envelopes sent from our distribution warehouse, and plastic-packaged ingredients



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for our school workshops. Detail about why we cannot avoid these plastics and how we plan to remove them in future can be found in the sections below.

We've added "eliminating single-use plastic" to our Environmental Goals, meaning we'll continue to monitor, record and report against it in our annual Environmental Report (accessible via our website³).

Removing single-use plastic is not a simple process, nor are all plastics bad. This report details how we've assessed each area of use (products, operations and supply chain), giving an honest assessment of factors such as cost, practicalities and life cycle analyses to ensure we've achieved the best solutions.

³ www.wwf.org.uk/who-we-are/walking-the-talk



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OUR JOURNEY

Our commitment is to remove all avoidable single-use plastic from our products, operations and supply chain by 2020. Below, we examine each of these areas, discussing the challenges we've faced, the steps we've taken to address them, and savings achieved from this process.

OPERATIONS

'Operations' encompasses everything we use behind the scenes, the items and services common to many offices, such as tea and coffee, bin bags, and cleaning products.

Challenges

Our business operations accounted for 41% of our plastic use. Items such as sugar and sweetener packets, teabag wrappers and alternative milk cartons all contained hidden plastics, making them difficult to recycle. Our filter coffee came in individually wrapped 'laminated foil' pouches (containing plastic layers) and our milk bottles were plastic (although recyclable). Soya cartons are not recyclable in any of our offices, as they're a complex, laminated, material structure which includes aluminium, plastic and cardboard which our waste contractors can't process.



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Solutions

Our sugar and sweetener packets looked like paper but contained plastic linings to protect the product from moisture and this made them unrecyclable. We've replaced them with sugar cubes in cardboard boxes and sweetener in glass jars, both of which are highly recyclable. **By moving to these alternatives, we've removed 39,000 single-use plastic packets, weighing 19.5kg a year.**

Our herbal teas for our headquarters are supplied by Pukka as the company aligns best with our values: it uses certified organic ingredients, the bag is 100% home compostable, the string is 100% organic non-GMO cotton, and Pukka is a certified B-Corporation. However, the wrappers have long been a problem for us. Pukka has embarked on a similar plastics journey and has now developed packaging that is 100% recyclable, made from FSC-certified paper with an ultra-thin layer of plastic which waste contractors are able to remove as part of



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the recycling process. We are currently phasing out our supply of the unrecyclable packaging and transitioning to the new supply. This is the best solution for our office as loose-leaf tea with strainers is unworkable in an office of 250 people. **This change has allowed us to recycle 15,000 wrappers, avoiding 9kg of non-recyclable single-use plastic waste a year.**

Our new Facilities Management company, Engie, which operates in our headquarters, is also committed to our single-use plastic position and is working with us to achieve this. Together, we've reduced a large volume of cleaning chemicals from our building, replacing them with a demineralised water product, Purex, distributed from a cabinet and decanted into reusable bottles. Purex can be used as a cleaner for all surfaces and floors. For the other cleaning products we can't replace, we buy the largest bottles available (five litres) and decant into smaller, refillable bottles. We do this at each of our three offices. As cleaning products and washing up liquid are used multiple times over a long duration, we wouldn't classify these as single-use plastics but strive to reduce unnecessary packaging where possible. **Changing to Purex has reduced our plastic consumption by around 6kg a year.**

We've removed single-use plastic from our stationery cupboard, an area we previously thought to be unavoidable. Although we'd swapped several items to plastic-free alternatives (such as Post-it notes in cardboard boxes), many items of stationery are typically plastic wrapped. We recently changed stationery supplier to Red Inc, which offers a plastic-free service, among other environmental benefits. It unpackages products and recycles the plastic at its warehouse, rather than passing this on to consumers who may be unable to process different waste streams. It also delivers in reusable crates which are returned with the next delivery. We've also switched our plastic tape to sustainably sourced, recycled paper tape which is recyclable and naturally degrades. **Switching to paper tapes and packaging-free stationery has removed 17.5kg of plastic a year from our operations.**

At our headquarters we use ground coffee for our filter machines which comes in a multi-layer 'foil' pack. The material is foil, laminated with LDPE (low-density polyethylene), and is currently not collected for recycling by the waste contractors that support our offices. We considered alternatives such as switching to coffee beans in paper bags, but this would require replacing our existing coffee machines which would, in itself, be wasteful and expensive. Instead we've switched coffee supplier to Bird & Wild and replaced our 60g portioned coffee packets with 500g bags, which we dispense into the machines using a reusable scoop. Although the bags are still LDPE and cannot be collected for recycling, changing to larger packaging reduces the volume we dispose of. This is the most workable solution for us at present. Bird & Wild coffee not only saves plastic, it's one of the most



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ethical and environmentally friendly coffees on the market and is cheaper than our previous supplier. **Switching to Bird & Wild has prevented 5,780 non-recyclable plastic pouches a year, weighing 8.7kg. It's also saved us almost £3,000 a year.**

In February 2019 our Edinburgh and Woking offices switched to organic milk in reusable glass bottles, from Milk and More. The glass bottles are collected with the next delivery and are reused 25 times before they are recycled. **Although this switch is more expensive - increasing costs by around £1,700 a year - it has allowed us to remove roughly 3,000 plastic bottles, weighing 137kg a year.** Our colleagues in Cardiff had already switched to glass-bottled milk in 2018 and have since encouraged several other tenants in their building to switch too.

Unavoidable plastic

Non-dairy milks have been a problem for us; typically, soya and oat milks are packaged in multi-material laminated cartons which cannot be recycled in our waste streams. These cartons contain a sandwich of materials including aluminium, plastic and cardboard. They require specialist machinery to extract any valuable material from them for recycling. Options such as dairy-free milks in plastic PET⁴ bottles became available this year but did not meet our procurement policy. We only purchase legume and grain-based alternative milks due to their lower environmental impact than nut milks, and these must be organic or ProTerra certified. A new option for oat milk in glass bottles became available in November 2019 through Milk and More, which we switched to despite the 54% price increase.

Switching from cartons to glass bottles for our oat milk has saved 18.7kg of unrecyclable waste annually but will cost an extra £360 a year.

We still require a provision of soya milk, which will remain in cartons for the time being until an alternative becomes available. To reduce waste, we're now buying 1-litre soya cartons (rather than 500ml ones) to reduce the volume of unrecyclable packaging. **Transitioning from 500ml to 1-litre cartons has saved just over 6.2kg of unrecyclable waste a year.**

Bin bags are our second-heaviest source of plastic waste (256kg a year). We explored several options to reduce the quantity of bin bags we use. For example, we investigated removing bin bags and depositing waste and recycling from our small bins into our larger commercial wheelie bins outside. We have no facilities to wash and dry the smaller bins so this option wasn't feasible. At our smaller offices in Scotland and Wales we've asked the cleaners not to empty the bins every day (unless they contain waste that would begin to smell), and in our

⁴ PET - Polyethylene terephthalate, category 1 plastic, the most widely recycled and recyclable plastic.



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headquarters we've reduced the frequency of emptying to once or twice a day. Using our plastic hierarchy, we've opted for 100% recycled plastic bin bags for our general waste stream, and a compostable bag for our food bin, compatible with the anaerobic digestion facility it is sent to. These are the best options currently available.

PRODUCTS

Products are items we've created or developed for promotion and distribution to our supporters and stakeholders.

Challenges

We strive to act responsibly in preserving the planet and ensuring the products we send to supporters or stakeholders align with this. Our highest volume of single-use plastic came from envelope windows. We send more than 2.1 million postal communications a year, which means 2.1 million pieces of plastic.

Although we encourage our supporters to opt for digital mailing, physical communications are still important to our organisation. We want to ensure



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our products are as plastic-free as possible – including our cuddly toys, which used to feature a single-use plastic kimble (the plastic, fish-shaped cable which attaches the information tag to the toy) which was wasteful and unnecessary.

The WWF-UK shop has a complex relationship with single-use plastic. Our shop is a prominent external-facing element of our organisation and any items we sell should promote our values to consumers. However, there are restrictions with product packaging, safety and fulfilment to be considered.

Solutions

We've collaborated with our print management company, Signal, to redesign our envelopes, removing windows completely. Previously we experimented with biodegradable corn-starch windows for envelopes, yet these are further down the waste hierarchy and it can be challenging to ensure an item is truly biodegradable. Instead we opted to change our communications to 100% recyclable paper. We're now phasing out windowed envelopes across the organisation and in our fulfilment warehouse.



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Switching has been cost-neutral concerning envelope unit costs, but there have been complications with data security and additional ‘matching’ requirements, increasing costs by an additional 5-30% (depending on the size and complexity of the mailing).

We have received very positive feedback from our supporters, and we hope this will strengthen engagement with them. **By switching, we’ve saved roughly 2.1 million pieces of disposable single-use plastic a year, weighing around 700kg.** Work is under way to remove the final 85,000 windowed envelopes from our communications. These are sent by our fulfilment warehouse which is currently unable to print on envelopes but is developing a solution so it will be able to do so in 2020.

We’ve also worked with our fulfilment warehouse to redesign our membership and adoption packs, which contain a cuddly toy (or similar gift) and welcome information for our supporters, to remove the need for plastic tape. These have been redesigned to fit within a recycled cardboard box and sealed with a small (2cm), FSC paper sticky tab for added security for postage. **This has reduced the need for plastic tape by around 30 rolls, saving 4kg of plastic waste a year.**

Our adoption toys have been redesigned to remove the information tag and plastic kimble. As our cuddly toys arrive with a pack of information about the animal, having extra facts on a tag attached to the toy is unnecessary. We’ve kept the relevant safety information included on a fabric strip sewn into the fabric at the bottom of the toy. **Removing the plastic tags will save at least 55,000 pieces of plastic a year, weighing 11kg.**

We’ve stopped providing goody bags and freebies at most of our events, as supporters often don’t want or need extra items. For our community fundraising events, such as the London Marathon and Ride London, we provide refreshments for our runners, cyclists and volunteers. Typically, we give out crisps, sweets and bottles of water, which are often used once then recycled or disposed of.

We initially experimented with larger water bottles dispensed into cups, but the cups had to be disposable due to lack of cleaning facilities and transportation issues. In April 2019 we trialled water in recyclable aluminium cans for the Brighton Marathon. Aluminium cans have a higher recycling rate (the global average is 60%⁵) and greater recycling potential (infinite). We’ve found that sporting events are taking up the torch of reducing plastic too. The Royal Parks Half Marathon established successful water refill stations and banned plastic ‘tat’ from the event. We’ve stopped giving out water to runners where adequate

⁵ <http://recycling.world-aluminium.org/review/quality-value/>



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stations are provided and we'll use aluminium cans where required. **Switching to aluminium cans will potentially save around 3.5kg of plastic a year.**

Unavoidable plastic

Some sporting events are held in colder months, such as the Brighton Marathon, and we provide our volunteers and runners with hot drinks to thank them. Many volunteers and runners bring refillable cups with them, but we still have a supply of disposables in case. These cups are made from bagasse (a sugar cane by-product), contain no plastic lining, and are biodegradable. We encourage our volunteers and supporters to choose reusables so we don't have to replenish this supply of disposables.

Ten items we currently stock in our online shop come wrapped in single-use plastic, though we won't renew five of them when stocks run out. For retail items we've switched from disposable single-use plastic to either recyclable or home compostable cellulose packaging made from plant matter. This is still a single-use plastic but it's the most workable solution at present as we need to prevent damage and contamination to specific items, as well as improve efficiency of order fulfilment for which the packaging must be clear. New ranges of retail clothing have switched to print-on-demand, reducing the need to store items in our warehouse in protective plastic packaging. Instead, items are printed and sent out in paper packaging from the printers. We've also begun a trial of paper packaging for our annual calendars.

SUPPLY CHAIN

Our supply chain includes the businesses that supply to us and those we collaborate with. As these are organisations external to WWF-UK, it's been unfeasible to collate data about the volume of single-use plastic removed, so we haven't included it in this section.

Challenges

We strive to ensure the companies we work with are protecting the planet for future generations, reducing their own environmental impacts, including those associated with products and services supplied specifically to us. Anecdotally, although suppliers can find it challenging to meet the restrictions imposed by our Environmental Procurement Policy for goods and services, they are



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often inspired by this too, and develop a greater understanding of the environmental impacts of their products and processes. The influence of Blue Planet II has raised awareness amongst suppliers of the environmental impacts associated with plastic leaking into nature. This presented an opportunity for us to influence our supply chain to remove unnecessary plastics.

Solutions

Some of the spaces within our headquarters can be hired, and catering is often required for events, as well as occasionally for staff meetings. Initially, catering would arrive in reusable dishes with cling film covers for all canapés, sandwiches and desserts. Our catering supplier, Avala, has always been eager to work with us to improve its environmental credentials; it has ensured all ingredients meet our strict sourcing criteria each year. Together we found the most workable solution was to replace clingfilm with reusable, rigid food covers, which are washed and returned with the next delivery. This has removed unrecyclable waste packaging (cling film), and the rigid cover makes it easier and more secure to transport food.

We've embedded reporting requirements for single-use plastics into our tender process when opening new opportunities to suppliers. Recently we tendered for the supply of cuddly toys and for our fulfilment services. These processes both included requirements that potential suppliers provide accurate reporting data on how much single-use plastic they would be using, a plan to reduce the volumes in use, and a commitment to reduce this where possible in their business operations. Both suppliers that were appointed have pledged to reduce plastic use during the contract duration.

Collaboration with Signal has not only focused on removing windowed envelopes from communications but also minimising plastic in deliveries, as it was common for large print jobs to be bundled in plastic when delivered to our offices. Our preference is for deliveries to be packaged in recyclable cardboard boxes using corrugated cardboard instead of bubble wrap or polystyrene peanuts.

We've also had an impact on the agencies that help us put together interactive campaigns and events for ourselves and our partners. We brief agencies on our policies and try to ensure materials have longevity and recyclability rather than being disposable. As part of this, we've been ensuring that agencies comply with our new single-use plastic policy and are working with them to understand what constitutes 'single-use' as well as identifying alternatives to avoid them. For this year's Christmas advert (December 2019), we asked the creative agency behind the production to sign up to the AdGreen⁶ standard which helps the

⁶ www.adgreen-apa.net



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advertising industry use more sustainable production methods. This required environmental impacts to be minimised – such as waste, transport, energy and water. It also promoted reusable options over single-use plastic and disposable items.

While tackling our larger suppliers, our staff have felt empowered to approach smaller suppliers and local businesses to use their influence for positive change. Our media team get a stock of newspapers delivered to our headquarters daily by a local newsagent. These previously arrived wrapped in an unrecyclable plastic band, but after staff contacted the newsagent these are now delivered with a strip of scrap paper around them instead. Staff have also been influencing local businesses to avoid single-use plastics in all office locations (England, Scotland and Wales), and have added their voices to support the ‘bring your own container’ movement – receiving discounts for having lunchboxes filled rather than using single-use packaging.

We’ve encouraged staff to reduce plastic in their personal lives too, where possible. As well as providing a stock of reusable coffee cups and containers for staff to take off-site and use in town, we’ve also forged connections with local zero-waste businesses. We’ve frequently hosted ‘zero waste refill’ stalls in our headquarters to allow staff to refill old containers with products such as washing liquid, shampoo, and cereals. In all three office locations we’ve also installed Terracycle recycling bins for crisp packets, sweet wrappers and biscuit packets. These wrappers constituted a large portion of our single-use plastic waste. Being able to recycle them allows us to move higher up the waste hierarchy.

CONCLUSION

Tackling single-use plastic at WWF-UK should not have been a significant challenge – we started in a privileged position. We have strong policies and procedures in place to reduce waste and think minimally. We have a medium-sized organisation of roughly 350 staff and just three office locations. Most importantly we have a staff cohort of environmentally-minded professionals, reading and writing about climate change daily, and supporters who expect us to protect the planet.



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Despite this, we’ve faced challenges. Although we’ve made significant progress, removing all single-use plastic that we knowingly can (949kg of 1,279kg), eliminating the remaining 26%



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of the plastics in our operations currently remains a challenge. We've made progress towards our ambition by removing disposable items, switching to responsibly sourced alternative materials and changing suppliers to those who are supportive of environmental issues, but we've also faced increased costs too. At times, the relatively small scale of our organisation has meant we've been unable to influence suppliers to adapt. Other barriers include operational practicalities, facilities requirements, and legislation. Although many industries are improving availability of plastic-free products there is still a sea of greenwashing to navigate.

Working to reduce unnecessary single-use plastics is a developing journey, but it is the right journey to be on. With any environmental decision, choosing the 'correct' course of action requires careful assessment of many variables, including lifecycle analysis. Plastic can be a useful material; it's lightweight, easy to transport, flexible and can be less prone to breakage than materials such as glass. But it also comes with an environmental cost, particularly when poorly managed at its end of life, when it leaks into nature.

Resource consumption is a significant problem for our planet; we are consuming at a rate that is unsustainable and this is leading to effects such as biodiversity loss, habitat degradation and pollution. It's essential that we all make careful use of resources and strive towards a circular economy, where precious resources are kept in use for as long as possible. We must continue to question whether products are necessary, minimise the amount we use, choose reusable options, and avoid or reduce packaging, while promoting recyclability. This approach will help us tackle the plastic pollution crisis and ensure we live within the means of our planet.

This report has been reviewed by an external audit team from EnviroSense to verify its reliability, completeness, accuracy and appropriateness.

All information is accurate at the time of writing.

To find out more, please visit [wwf.org.uk/walkingthetalk](https://www.wwf.org.uk/walkingthetalk) or contact Lauren Wiseman, environmental manager, lwiseman@wwf.org.uk

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