Submission from the Association for the Protection of Rural Scotland

This submission should be considered as a response only to question 1 of the Committee’s call for evidence.

Deposit return for Scottish local authorities

The Association for the Protection of Rural Scotland (APRS) established the Have You Got The Bottle campaign in 2015 to support the introduction of a deposit return system for Scotland, covering glass and plastic drinks bottles as well as cans. Consumers would pay a small deposit when they buy a can or a bottle, which would be refunded in full when they return the bottle.

This system is already in operation in many places around the world, with more than a quarter of a billion people now living in territories that use deposit return. Elsewhere, local authorities have been active parts of campaigns for deposit return, and here in Scotland Aberdeenshire and Midlothian Councils have already voted unanimously to support the principle.

Cost savings

Zero Waste Scotland published research in May 2015 which looked at the overall financial benefits for councils from a national deposit return system.

That research estimated that Scotland’s 32 local authorities would collectively save £13m each year. The largest single item would be a saving of £7m associated with reduced litter picking, followed by a saving of £5m on the cost of kerbside recycling, and a final £1m reduction in costs for household waste recycling centres.

The average saving for Scottish local authorities would be more than £2.40 per resident per year. Amounts would be specific to each local authority, so some might see an even greater reduction in costs - for example, to collection costs for urban areas.

International evidence is consistent with these findings. A 2012 report commissioned by the Local Government Association of New South Wales estimated that deposit return would save local authorities there between £1.77 and £4.72 per resident each year.

Deposit return and kerbside recycling

Scottish local authorities currently use a mixture of kerbside collection and street recycling bins for dry mixed recycling, including cans plus glass and plastic bottles. The quality of recyclable materials collected this way is often low, as it is frequently contaminated by other recyclable materials, by food or by other types of waste.
Recycling rates could be improved by reducing the opportunity for contamination. This could include reducing the range of items collected in kerbside and street recycling bins, which would also reduce sorting costs.

**Trade waste**

Many local authorities are moving away from running their own trade waste services. Deposit return means that businesses no longer have to pay for collections of cans and bottles, and are instead paid a small sum for each item returned, on top of the returned deposit. Deposit return can therefore save businesses substantial sums, especially those in the catering, restaurant and hospitality sectors.

**On the go**

Collecting waste from street bins is costly and labour-intensive for local authorities. Drinks containers are often consumed and disposed of on the go, and deposit return would greatly reduce the number of these containers that end up in street bins.

Although cans and plastic bottles are relatively light, they currently take up a substantial amount of space in street bins, which means these bins need to be emptied regularly. Bins are often filled to overflowing, which then increases the need for litter collection and street cleaning. The resulting litter is unsightly and a frequent source of complaints from local residents.

Deposit return would not eliminate all single-use containers from street bins, but with a typical return rate of around 95% it would certainly lead to a marked reduction, which would reduce landfill tax costs and MRF gate fees local authorities currently pay.

**Litter collection**

Zero Waste Scotland’s report estimates that single-use drinks containers constitute 17% of Scotland’s total litter by weight. Assuming proportional costs, that means taxpayers pay an estimated £7.28m each year to clean up this litter in Scotland. Littered cans and bottles have another negative impact: they tend to increase the incidence of other litter - the “litter breeds litter” effect.

The litter that results from the current collection system has a wide range of negative effects, from impacts on property values and mental health to the perceived disamenity of terrestrial and marine litter. Reducing litter collection costs is just the tip of the iceberg in terms of tangible benefits to local taxpayers. Zero Waste Scotland’s research estimated the costs associated with littered drinks containers alone at more than £200m per year, all of which is paid for by taxpayers, and this money could be better spent on other public services.

**Recommendations**

A well-designed deposit return system does not require significant budget commitments to implement, although clearly there is staff time incurred in consultation and system design. Setup costs in Norway, for example, were covered
by the deposits paid at the start of the system’s operation, at a point when fewer deposits were being refunded.

Such a system could bring substantial ongoing savings for local authorities, most notably the £13m annual estimate cited above from Zero Waste Scotland research, but also the additional savings associated with litter collection.

APRS therefore urges the Local Government and Communities Committee to press Scottish Ministers to commit to the early introduction of a deposit return system so these savings can be used to offset the pressure of budget reductions being experienced by local government and local taxpayers.

Association for the Protection of Rural Scotland