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Caroline Russell AM

Chair of the Environment Committee

3 December 2018

Rt. Hon Michael Gove MP

Secretary of State, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs

(sent by email to Plastics.Consultation@defra.gsi.gov.uk)

Dear Secretary of State,

Over the last few years, the London Assembly Environment Committee has considered the challenges London faces in respect of single-use plastics. In 2017, we published a report on bottled water, which made a number of recommendations to the Mayor to reduce London's reliance on single-use plastic water bottles.¹ In the report, we suggested that the Government and the Mayor trial a deposit return scheme for plastic bottles in London.

In 2018, we published a report on unflushable single-use plastics that pollute the City's sewers, such as period and incontinence products, baby and wet wipes.² I am happy to share our learning and express our support for the proposed bans on plastic straws, cotton buds and drink stirrers. On behalf of the committee I also take this opportunity to urge the Government to be more ambitious; single-use wet wipes containing plastic should be included in this ban and more measures should be introduced to stem the flow of plastic bottles and unflushable products ending up in our rivers and oceans.

Questions 6, 10, 30, 40

The committee supports the proposals to introduce a ban on plastic straws, plastic stemmed cotton buds and plastic drink stirrers. The committee also supports the exemptions for medical and specialist purposes, until appropriate alternatives have been developed and are accessible.

Questions 23, 38, 46

While the committee supports the proposed bans, our research has shown how harmful other single-use plastic products are. In the consultation paper, cotton buds being flushed

¹ London Assembly Environment Committee, Bottled Water, April 2017 - https://www.london.gov.uk/sites/default/files/environment_committee_-_bottled_water_-_report.pdf

² London Assembly Environment Committee, Single-use plastic: unflushables, August 2018 - https://www.london.gov.uk/sites/default/files/environment_committee_-_plastic_unflushables_0.pdf

down toilets were identified as a particular disposal problem. However, this applies to many other products. No wet wipe, period or incontinence product currently on the market disintegrates fully when flushed. As with cotton buds, when these products are not picked up during the treatment process, they find their way into rivers and oceans. We heard that Thames 21 collected nearly 10,000 wet wipes from just one location over a two-year period and that the banks of the Thames are being re-shaped with a build-up of wet wipes and mud.³

Ultimately, the committee would like to see the government ban unflushable single-use wet wipes which contain plastic. However, in the absence of a ban, the government should consider mandating that the labels of unflushable products should display, in a prominent position, proper disposal information and information for the consumer about the presence of plastic in the product.

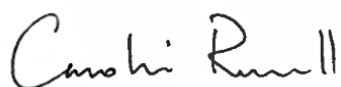
Unflushable single-use plastic products are inconsistently labelled despite industry guidance. As disposable labelling is voluntary, many unflushable products currently omit 'do not flush' symbols from their packaging, or place the symbols where they are less obvious. We also strongly suggest that there should be a statutory format to make it easier for consumers to understand and remember the message to "bin it, don't flush it". This would also increase consumer awareness of the environmental damage that their unflushable plastic products could cause when flushed down toilets.

Reusable products are gaining popularity over single-use unflushables. New reusable products such as nappies, wipes and period pants or pads are now widely available, allowing people to manage their continence and periods in an environmentally friendly way. Consumers should continue to be encouraged to use reusables in all areas of their life.

Where plastic waste is still produced, recycling must be encouraged and enabled. I would like to take this opportunity to urge the government to consider the recommendations set out in our two reports, in particular, a plastic bottle return scheme, a ban on wet wipes and a consistent labelling standard for plastic unflushables. These measures would significantly reduce the amount of plastic causing devastation to our rivers and seas.

If you would like more information or have any questions, please get in touch via environmentcommittee@london.gov.uk.

Yours sincerely



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Chair of the Environment Committee

³ <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2018/may/02/wet-wipes-boom-is-changing-the-shape-of-british-riverbeds>