

# Plastic waste in the environment



The production and use of plastic materials by society has increased exponentially over the last 60 or so years, and is predicted to continue to grow at a similar rate in the coming decades, based on current consumption trends. Although re-use and recycling of plastic has improved substantially, there is still a large amount of plastic-based material that ends up in the countryside, which can affect wildlife on land, in waterways and in the sea.

In fact, plastic pollution in the marine environment is increasingly being recognised as a significant issue for both wildlife and people, with most of the plastic 'marine debris' in the sea coming from land-based sources. Over time plastics slowly break down into millions of microscopic fragments known as microplastics. These persist for decades and can contain toxic chemicals, often absorbed from the surrounding environment. Microplastic particles work their way downstream through watersheds, becoming available to numerous types of animals as they go. Plastic pollution in the marine environment has been reported in almost every known marine habitat – from the poles to the equator and from the shoreline to the deepest parts of the ocean. Microplastic particles have recently been found in farmed shellfish such as oysters and mussels, meaning that human consumption of microplastics via this type of seafood is already happening.

Current research is also looking at plastic uptake through food chains to see if microplastics are moving up marine food chains in particular. Closer to home, plastic pollution in the local countryside is widespread, whether it is through littering or from agricultural waste. Plastic packaging used in agriculture makes up approximately 1.5% of the overall volume of plastic packaging in the waste stream in England. The types of plastic wastes can vary and be both bulky and dirty, often making the management of these wastes difficult. Around 135,500 tonnes of agricultural plastic waste is produced each year in the UK.

There have been a number of reports in the last few years of agricultural plastic packaging left on fields around Plumpton after muck spreading.

These, often quite large pieces of packaging, are blown into hedgerows or onto fences, where they accumulate, but they also become hidden from view and covered by vegetation growth in spring and summer. However, they do persist and start to fragment if not removed from the countryside.

There are a number of schemes operating in different parts of the UK to collect agricultural plastic waste and make it easier for farmers to dispose of it. The Agricultural Waste Plastics Collection and Recovery Programme provides general guidance to farmers for the handling, segregation and storage of agricultural waste plastics. In some counties agricultural waste can be disposed of free of charge for recycling. For example Coastal Recycling in Devon operate a CoastAgri scheme whereby agricultural waste can be taken to one of two recycling centres in the county for free (see [www.coastaluk.co.uk/coastal-agri.html](http://www.coastaluk.co.uk/coastal-agri.html)).

Although, on the whole, local littering is not a major problem in Plumpton and East Chilmington and the surrounding countryside, if you do see plastic items such as bottles or wrappers, please pick them up and recycle them if possible or put them in a bin. This helps to minimise plastic pollution locally and prevents the production of microplastics, which will eventually find their way to the sea. An annual voluntary clean-up of litter and other mainly plastic waste could also be an option in Plumpton if there is enough interest and willing. Something the Parish Council could consider?

*Simon Harding*