



Deposit return schemes: best practice and benefits

Deposit return schemes are scheduled to launch across the UK in October 2025. In light of the triple global crises of climate change, pollution and nature and biodiversity loss, we urgently need to establish this tried and tested circular economy measure and improve the way we manage our resources. Now is the time to implement deposit return schemes that will help us meet our climate mitigation and waste prevention objectives, protect the environment and create jobs and economic opportunities.

Background

The Environment Act 2021 gave Ministers in England, Wales and Northern Ireland the ability to bring in deposit return schemes by regulation. Secondary legislation has been in place in Scotland since 2020. In January 2023, Defra published a [response to the UK Government's public consultation](#), stating that deposit schemes in England and Northern Ireland would launch in October 2025, for PET bottles and metal cans. This breaks the UK Government's 2019 manifesto commitment to include glass beverage bottles. The Welsh Government has committed to introducing deposit return in October 2025, and this scheme will include both glass and PET bottles, as well as metal cans.

Benefits of Deposit Return Schemes

Higher collection rates. Most countries with modern deposit return schemes achieve return rates above 90% (with Germany showing the best results at 98%), diverting significant quantities of drinks containers from disposal and keeping glass, metal and PET plastic circulating in the economy. [Reloop found](#) that wastage levels in places with a deposit return scheme were on average 78.6% lower in 2017 than those without. The same report estimated that average return rates with deposit return would be 91% for PET bottles, 89% for cans, and 97% for glass; significantly higher than the rates achieved by typical kerbside recycling schemes. The UK's current recycling rates for these materials sits at around [an average of 70%](#).

Reduced carbon emissions. At a per unit (can or bottle) level, greenhouse gas emissions associated with glass are three to four times higher than for aluminium and PET. [Recycling glass saves](#) just 25% of the energy costs, whereas recycling aluminium saves 90%. This means that reuse and refill of glass, as well as a switch away from it where possible, will be key. Including glass bottles in a deposit return scheme from the start will keep costs down and establish the infrastructure required to move towards refillable glass in the future. Excluding glass from a deposit system risks producers switching to the most carbon-intensive material.

Less litter. Keep Britain Tidy's National Litter Survey has demonstrated that, by volume, drinks containers make up 75% of the litter found on our streets.

In Latvia, where deposit return has now been operating for two years, litter surveys have shown a 56% reduction of deposit bearing containers in coastal locations since February 2022. Defra's own reports predict an eventual 85% reduction of the littering of in-scope containers.

Improved circularity. [The UK's Plastic Packaging Tax](#) applies to plastic packaging manufactured in, or imported into the UK, that does not contain at least 30% recycled plastic. Current recycling schemes make this material difficult to source. There's not enough high-quality material being collected and recycled within the UK to meet demand. Deposit schemes generate a clean stream of materials by collecting and managing bottles in a way that minimises contamination and downcycling (i.e glass bottles becoming fibreglass).

High levels of public support. In 2023, YouGov polling commissioned by Keep Britain Tidy found that 66% supported the policy, with only 13% opposing. Support was highest among 2019 Liberal Democrat voters (76%), but was above average for both Labour voters (72%) and Conservative voters (69%).

Worldwide [support for deposit return schemes remains high](#) with, for example, 83% of Italians supporting the introduction of a deposit return scheme; 91.6% of Portuguese people are in favour of deposit return for all drinks packaging, and 86% of Slovakian poll respondents indicated they were in favour of the scheme.

What makes a “best in class” scheme?

- Return to retail infrastructure - the highest level of convenience for consumers
- Deposit level high enough to create an incentive to return the containers
- Broad scope of materials and products - glass, metal, PET; soft and alcoholic beverages
- Producer responsibility - scheme paid for by the beverage industry via a non-profit company
- Meaningful collection and recycling targets, with oversight, enforcement and penalties
- Optimised logistics - highest collection and processing of materials with lowest emissions

Timeline

Recently implemented European schemes

Country	Legislation Enacted	System Operator appointment	System start date	Scope
Slovakia	September 2019	February 2021	January 2022	plastic, metal
Latvia	August 2020	January 2021	February 2022	plastic, metal, glass
Malta	July 2020	September 2020	November 2022	plastic, metal, glass
Romania	October 2021	May 2022	November 2023	plastic, metal, glass
Hungary	February 2021	February 2022	January 2024	plastic, metal, glass

Upcoming schemes

Several other European countries are preparing to roll out their deposit return schemes soon, including Austria, Greece, Portugal and Poland, as well as Ireland’s scheme which launches this February 1st!

International Testimonials

“I am still amazed by the power of the deposit value itself. After people see the first results, they’re really proud. It’s a matter of national pride!”

Rauno Raal, Estonia (former CEO of Eesti-Pandipakend) scheme began in 2009.

“Go for it.. You will make very many people happy if you get all that rubbish of the streets.”

“It would have been easier if we’d been able to introduce everything at the same time.”

Stientje van Veldhoven, the Netherlands (former minister of environment) scheme began in 2021.

“It is extremely efficient, almost 100% of the bottles are being returned. A circular economy needs to be our aim.”

Thorbjørn Berntsen, Norway (former minister of environment) Introduced for cans and plastic bottles in 1999.

“Once you get a DRS in, it’s incredibly popular, the beverage industry stops making noise and starts investing in bottle to bottle plants and you’ll have an incredible example of the circular economy.”

Jeff Angel (CEO Boomerang Alliance Australia), scheme began in ‘South Australia’ 1977.