

Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee

6th Meeting, 2023 (Session 6), Wednesday
19 April 2023

PE1896: Provide every primary school child in Scotland with a reusable water bottle

Petitioner	Callum Isted
Petition summary	Calling on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to replace the disposable water bottle provided with primary school lunches with a sustainable, reusable, metal bottle.
Webpage	https://petitions.parliament.scot/petitions/PE1896

Introduction

1. The Committee last considered this petition at its meeting on [22 February 2023](#). At that meeting, the Committee took evidence from Lorna Slater, the Minister for Green Skills, Circular Economy and Biodiversity, and Laura Meikle, Head of Support and Wellbeing Unit.
2. The Committee agreed to consider the evidence heard at a future meeting.
3. The petition summary is included in **Annexe A** and the Official Report of the Committee's last consideration of this petition is at **Annexe B**.
4. Written submissions received prior to the Committee's last consideration can be found on the [petition's webpage](#).
5. Further background information about this petition can be found in the [SPICe briefing](#) for this petition.
6. The Scottish Government's initial position on this petition can be found on the [petition's webpage](#).

Action

7. The Committee is invited to consider what action it wishes to take.

Clerk to the Committee

Annexe A

PE1896: Provide every primary school child in Scotland with a reusable water bottle

Petitioner

Callum Isted

Date Lodged

20/09/2021

Petition summary

Calling on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to replace the disposable water bottle provided with primary school lunches with a sustainable, reusable, metal bottle.

Previous action

Callum has:

- written to his headteacher, who forwarded his complaint to West Lothian Council who then made the disposable water bottle in school lunches optional
- contacted & received positive responses from several MSPs
- raised over £1,400 to buy reusable water bottles for his school, with additional lids to make his scheme sustainable for the future
- will have finished walking the entire John Muir Way (134 miles) in order to raise the money above

Background information

Each week schoolchildren are given 250ml disposable plastic water bottles to have with their lunches. Callum (age 7) feels very strongly that this is the wrong thing to do.

Callum has been running his campaign since early 2021 and is very determined to succeed.

He says that you want to help the environment but were wasting more plastic than the weight of one of the pandas at the zoo (estimated per

school, per year). He has solved the problem for his school and now wants to help the whole of Scotland.

Many adults have agreed with him and Sue Webber MSP has been particularly helpful.

He says adults should listen to children about the environment and provide the money to buy more water bottles. Shortly, he will have walked 134 miles to prove his point.

He has already achieved a phenomenal amount for a 7 year old and I hope his petition is viewed positively.

[Written by Callum and a parent]

Annexe B

Extract from the Official Report of last consideration of PE1896 on 22nd February 2023

The Deputy Convener: The next item is petition PE1896, on providing every primary school child in Scotland with a reusable water bottle, which was lodged by Callum Isted. The petition calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to replace the disposable water bottles that are provided with primary school lunches with sustainable, reusable metal bottles.

We previously considered the petition at our meeting on 23 November 2022, when we agreed to invite the Cabinet Secretary for Net Zero, Energy and Transport to give evidence to the committee. We have instead the Minister for Green Skills, Circular Economy and Biodiversity, Lorna Slater, giving evidence on the petition this morning. I thank the minister for coming.

Members have a number of questions that they would like to explore, but first I believe that you have an opening statement, minister.

The Minister for Green Skills, Circular Economy and Biodiversity (Lorna Slater): I do. Thank you very much.

I congratulate Callum Isted on the incredible effort that he has put behind the petition and the campaign, and for raising £1,400 to buy reusable bottles for his school. His work has been an inspiration to us all.

I and this Government are committed to this agenda and are seeking to dramatically reduce the amount of single-use plastic products that we consume and throw away in Scotland. That is why we are working hard right now to implement Scotland's deposit return scheme, have banned some of the most problematic single-use plastic products and are introducing a minimum charge on single-use beverage cups by 2025.

Scotland's deposit return scheme, which will cover the kinds of single-use bottles that we are talking about today, will alone reduce littering by a third and cut emissions by the equivalent of 4 million tonnes of carbon dioxide over 25 years. That is an average of around 160,000 tonnes of CO₂ each year, which is the equivalent of taking 83,000 cars off the road in the United Kingdom. However, I agree that that is only part of what we need to do. Education authorities and schools have a key role in leading the way.

Callum's petition has requested that the Scottish Government provides local authorities with funding to enable schools to give reusable metal water bottles to schoolchildren when they start in primary 1. Although I welcome the spirit of the request made in the petition and absolutely share the same ultimate goal—to reduce to a minimum the consumption of single-use plastics in schools—it is for local

authorities, as autonomous and democratic organisations, to agree their annual budgets, taking into account their statutory duties and national and local priorities.

The law says that all schools must make sure that drinking water is available free of charge for all pupils at all times of the day, including at meal times. It is for each education authority and school to decide how drinking water is provided, and it is important that we respect that, so that they can provide water in the way that works best for their school and their pupils.

The Scottish Government is clear that that decision, like others made by schools, should support our broader environmental goals. I know that those who provide catering in schools actively consider sustainability as part of their thinking about the delivery of their services. Sustainability is also reflected in the learning for sustainability cross-curricular theme, which encourages schools to take a whole-setting approach to it. That means that all school buildings, grounds and policies in the school should support learning for sustainability, including making sure that the school is taking steps to be more sustainable, which includes reducing the use of plastic.

I know that, in practical terms, local authorities use sustainable approaches to reduce the use of single-use plastic in schools. That includes the provision of water fountains, ensuring that water jugs and reusable cups are available in dining halls, and encouraging pupils to bring in and use reusable bottles. Furthermore, in direct response to the petition, my colleague Shirley-Anne Somerville wrote to the directors of education at all local authorities, drawing their attention to the petition and their obligations to provide drinking water to pupils, and further encouraging them to do so in an environmentally friendly way. We will continue to build on that progress.

Thank you for inviting me here today. I look forward to answering your questions.

The Deputy Convener: Thank you, minister. Several members have questions. I will start.

Has there been any further engagement with local authorities' directors of education following the cabinet secretary's letter regarding the issues raised in the petition?

Lorna Slater: I am happy to pass that to my colleague Laura Meikle.

Laura Meikle (Scottish Government): Following the letter, we have not had any further engagement with directors of education. As part of the preparation of the letter, we engaged with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, the representative organisation for local authorities, in order to garner its support for it. We have not engaged further with local authorities at this point.

That is partly because there is an on-going duty on education authorities to provide water. Education authorities are also required to have due regard to any guidance provided by the Scottish ministers in relation to the provision for sustainability under the Schools (Health Promotion and Nutrition) (Scotland) Act 2007. That guidance has been in place for some time and, therefore, we would regard that as an on-going requirement of directors of education, rather than something that is new and has arisen specifically in response to the petition.

Carol Mochan: You spoke about the responsibility of local government to provide water for young people. I am interested to know to what extent that is monitored. Do we have any evidence that water is freely available and how well young people can access it?

Laura Meikle: There is on-going monitoring of the duties under the 2007 act. There is formal monitoring and there are specific nutrition inspections as part of the inspection arrangements for schools.

We engage regularly with catering services and education authorities as part of our on-going support for implementation of those provisions. You will recognise that provision of food and drinking water is a very important area and our nutritional standards have been revised recently. We have had significant engagement with educational authorities recently about the standards, and that engagement is on-going. We are well sighted on those provisions.

Our understanding of the position is that there was, of course, an impact on the provision of drinking water during the Covid-19 pandemic, because specific guidance was in place for education authorities at that time. That guidance has been removed now and catering services are returning to a more normal provision in schools. We are still engaging on that as part of our other commitments on the provision of food and drink in schools.

Carol Mochan: You talked about changes in the guidance. Do you know whether schools still give out disposable bottles or whether the provision is more sustainable now?

Laura Meikle: The petition suggests that single-use plastic bottles are provided in Callum Isted's school. That is not necessarily the practice in every school in Scotland, so we do not start from the position that it is. We are aware that there are other approaches. For example, instead of bottles, there may be reusable cups, cups made out of corn starch or a variety of other options. Single-use plastic is not quite as widespread as might have been presented.

Fergus Ewing: We are pleased that the extent to which schools provide water for pupils is monitored, but what is the upshot of that provision? What evidence do you have from each local authority on it?

Laura Meikle: I do not hold specific evidence. There is on-going monitoring and engagement by nutrition inspectors and we have on-going engagement with catering services. We have not done a specific exercise to monitor the provision, because it is a legal requirement of the Schools (Health Promotion and Nutrition) (Scotland) Act 2007 and the specific regulations.

Fergus Ewing: If you are not able to say what evidence there is, how do we know that children get water?

Laura Meikle: We know that from our discussions with catering services and education authorities. When you used the term "evidence", I thought that you meant a specific exercise that had been undertaken to establish the position in each education authority, rather than the evidence that we gather through our own on-

going and regular engagement with education authorities. We get feedback in that way.

Fergus Ewing: That is appreciated, but what Callum Isted has asked for—the minister said that he has done well, and we all recognise that—is that every primary school child should have a reusable water bottle. If you have your own water bottle, you carry it with you and you have it all day. If it is anything else, whether a fountain or a cup in the canteen, you do not always have that with you.

We are fortunate and privileged here in the committee room, where we all have water at the table, but they do not have that in schools. My point is twofold. First, every child should have access to water—you say that you do not know whether that is the case or not—and secondly, the point of the petition is that that access should be through means of a reusable bottle, so that there is less repetitive use of paper or plastic cups and so on, which are bad for the environment. The sum total of your evidence is that you do not know what is happening and you have not said yes to Callum's petition. There have been some warm words, but Callum has not really made any progress, has he?

Lorna Slater: I do not think that that is an accurate representation of the situation at all. There are other sustainable ways of providing water and it is up to schools to provide it in the way that works best for them. For example, if schools and local authorities have invested in water fountains and their maintenance and upkeep, that is how they have decided to meet the statutory requirement to provide water and that is how they have decided to spend their budgets. It is for them to make that decision. Equally, if schools have invested in jug and cup schemes, it is absolutely within their purview to decide how to spend that money and how to make the provision. It is not for us to impose upon them how to interpret the requirement to provide water.

We know that water is being provided, as my colleague said, because of our on-going conversations with education authorities.

Fergus Ewing: I would quite like to see the evidence, because it does not seem to me that there is clarity. There really should be clarity from each local authority, which should provide a simple explanation of what it does in each case.

My final question is this. If every child were to be provided with such a reusable bottle, that would enable a form of national procurement for every local authority. The way that procurement goes is that you get a better price with a national procurement scheme, because you are buying many more of exactly the same thing rather than having possibly 32 separate procurement exercises for bottles. Have you considered that? Has the minister had or sought advice about whether a national scheme would offer not only those cost benefits, because you get cheaper unit costs for larger procurements, but certainty that children actually get personal access to a reusable source of water, which they can have all the time? That would provide an answer to Callum's petition and provide near certainty that every child is properly hydrated, which, with respect, you are not able to say is the case at the moment.

Lorna Slater: Callum Isted's petition is specifically about a proposal to replace single-use bottles, which were what were being used in his school. Many schools already have in place solutions to that, such as water fountains or jug and cup schemes. That provision is already in place and we do not want to solve a problem that has already been solved in many schools. We know that schools are working towards the sustainability objective. We also have in place national programmes to tackle single-use plastics, such as our deposit return scheme. The process to move away from single-use plastics is well under way.

I recognise Callum Isted's hard work on the issue and the work that he has done with his school, but it is not necessarily the correct solution for every school, and it is up to schools and local authorities to put in place the correct solution for them.

Fergus Ewing: Thank you for those remarks, but, with respect, you have no evidence and I would suggest that you get evidence from each local authority to find out what is actually happening.

The Deputy Convener: Could the statutory guidance on nutritional requirements for food and drink in schools be revised to address the concerns that Callum Isted raised in the petition?

Laura Meikle: The requirements in the Schools (Health Promotion and Nutrition) (Scotland) Act 2007 and the food and nutrition regulations are already aligned to ensure that sustainability is considered as part of the approach to the provision of food and drink in schools. We would not need to amend the regulations to in order to address sustainability matters or the use of single-use plastic, because that arrangement is already built into the existing legislative arrangements. We have significant on-going engagement with education authorities and catering services on the issue and their arrangements for promoting sustainability.

Alexander Stewart: Minister, you have touched on the deposit return scheme. How would the deposit return scheme operate in schools and what impact could it have on the use of bottled water?

Lorna Slater: Schools may interact with the deposit return scheme in several ways. Large schools that have, for example, a cafeteria that sells drinks would be part of the scheme. They would charge the 20p, as any shop or cafeteria of that style would, and they would have an obligation under the scheme to decide whether they would operate as a return point. They would have the same options as any other cafeteria or similar venue: to operate as a manual return point, to install a reverse vending machine or to apply for an exemption from being a return point based on health and safety grounds or any of the other grounds that are available.

Schools that, for example, do free school meals and provide a free bottle have a couple of options. They could run as a closed-loop system, as many restaurants will. For example, when you buy a bottle of wine in a restaurant, you do not take that bottle away with you—the restaurant takes it back—so you will not pay a deposit on it. That is called a closed-loop system. If schools were to offer an open-loop system with free school meals, they would have to incorporate the price of the deposit in the

cost of the meal, because the child would be able to take the container away and collect the 20p when they returned it.

There are different ways in which schools may interact with the scheme. Of course, if schools moved away from using single-use plastics as a way of providing drinks, specifically water, that they are required to provide, they would not be required to participate in the deposit return scheme.

Alexander Stewart: Is any other legislation in Scotland or the UK been raised with the petitioner? He is trying to achieve something, and we know that people are trying to achieve other things as well, such as through the circular economy bill and the UK extended producer responsibility scheme. What impact could they have on the petition and on how you plan to go forward?

Lorna Slater: The member raises excellent points. Those are exactly the sorts of tools that we have as we move towards a circular economy and begin to get rid of waste. We are talking particularly about plastic waste, but waste of any materials or energy in our society is no good.

The extended producer responsibility scheme for plastic is a UK-wide initiative. It was two weeks ago, I think, that we passed at the committee the Scottish statutory instrument to start collecting data for the scheme. From 2024, large packaging producers will need to report on what their packaging is made of and how much packaging they produce—that sort of thing—and in 2025 they will pay fees based on how much packaging they produce. Those fees will be collected and distributed to local authorities to help them pay for recycling. It is another producer responsibility scheme in which the cost of handling materials at the end of their use will be passed to the producers of the materials, rather than being borne by the public purse. It is an exciting initiative that will, I hope, transform our recycling and the design of packaging materials, because it will incentivise producers of packaging to use more sustainable materials, more recyclable materials, and, I hope, less material altogether. It will be advantageous to them to do that under the fee scheme.

The other thing that you touched on was the circular economy bill, which is largely about establishing new powers. One of the things that was consulted on for the bill was powers to put charges on single-use items, and one of the things that we will look at next in the single-use space is single-use beverage cups. The bill is intended to establish powers so that we can be adaptable as we go forward and use targeted approaches, much like was done with plastic bags under our current powers. We know how effective that was in reducing litter and damage to the environment.

The Deputy Convener: Before we conclude taking evidence, is there anything else that you would like to add?

Lorna Slater: I would just say thank you very much to Callum Isted for bringing the matter to our attention. He is absolutely right: we should all be working towards using fewer single-use plastics and using reusable, long-term containers and packaging. I thank him so much for his work.

The Deputy Convener: Minister and Laura Meikle, thank you very much for your time. Members, are we content to consider the evidence that we have heard at a future meeting?

Members *indicated agreement.*