

Every local area to provide 50 working, publicly accessible drinking water fountains

A submission from Sustain to the National Food Strategy call for evidence

Improving public access to drinking water would contribute to the National Food Strategy's priorities by providing solutions to myriad public health and environmental issues.

In the last 15 years, bottled water consumption has doubledⁱ. Alongside an increase in consumption of other soft drinks, this means 13 billion plastic bottles are used in the UK every yearⁱⁱ. Bottles make up one third of plastic pollution in the seaⁱⁱⁱ. Encouraging people to carry and refill a reusable bottle, such as by providing drinking water fountains, saves resources and carbon dioxide emissions used to produce and transport bottles and reduces the costs of waste and recycling for local authorities.

Sugary drinks have been singled out as a major contributor to excess sugar in our diets^{iv}, a large and avoidable contributor to diet-related disease, and links with child obesity, early onset diabetes and tooth decay^v. Children consume three times the recommended amount of sugar^{vi}, and almost a quarter of sugar consumed by teenagers comes from sugary drinks^{vii}. If located in areas where children congregate, fountains would provide an alternative to sugary drinks, and to Refill points in cafes and shops where 24 hour access is limited, particularly to teenagers who may not feel welcome.

According to research by Keep Britain Tidy and BRITA, 78% of people would like to see greater availability of free tap water in public spaces^{viii}. Water fountains provide an accessible and convenient way for people to refill bottles and consume drinking water on the go.

New refill points and drinking fountains have been mentioned as part of key strategic policies recently, including London's Child Obesity Taskforce^{ix}, the Chief Medical Officer's report^x, and the Government's 25 year Environment Plan^{xi}. However they all lack detailed plans or targets.

Evidence of success

Sustain launched the 50 Fountains Challenge in September 2019 with City to Sea, who run the Refill campaign. It encourages local areas to commit to 50 working publicly accessible drinking water fountains, to install enough to hit their target and to list fountains on the Refill app^{xii}. Whilst no area currently does this (to our knowledge), we already have places like Southwark, which has 40 fountains, committing to meet this challenge in the next three years^{xiii}. Hillingdon Council installed over 30 in just one year (2018)^{xiv}. More information on how the challenge works can be found online^{xv}.

The Mayor of London's high profile partnership with Thames Water has seen new fountains installed across the Capital, and the #OneLess programme estimates 77,737 litres of water have been dispensed by 15 fountains over 12 months, equivalent to 155,474 500ml single-use plastic water bottles^{xvi}.

The Children's Health Fund, run by Sustain in partnership with over 100 restaurants including Jamie Oliver's, LEON and other businesses, distributed money raised by a pilot of the sugary drinks duty to good causes including access to tap water^{xvii}. We received over 600 expressions of interest for support on the water strand, with two thirds coming from schools, showing there is a clear desire for

better provision in these settings. Of the projects supported, the price of fountains and installation varied from under £1000 to £5000. The barriers to installation were less about money, and more about commitment and prioritisation, as fountain installation takes time and often multiple partners. Our guide to drinking fountain installation helps provide advice to overcome these barriers. This learning provided the inspiration to encourage local areas to take a more strategic long term approach to fountain installation, hence the 50 Fountains Challenge.

What does this idea need to succeed?

We want the National Food Strategy to champion the 50 Fountains Challenge. With just over 400 local administrative areas in the UK (local and unitary authorities), this would deliver over 20,000 working public drinking fountains, where currently they number in their hundreds. The Strategy should also advocate a similar approach to supporting installation in education settings – backing calls for water-only schools.

There are a number of funding options. A centralised scheme could provide economies of scale and inspiration through bold new designs which provide iconic public infrastructure to be the telephone and post boxes of the 21st century^{xviii}. Equally, using funding as a carrot to identify local demand, would put the onus on others to install the fountains, and could help unlock local match funding from local authorities, landowners, community crowd funding or local business sponsorship.

This could be delivered to a large degree by ring fencing just 10% of one year's revenue raised by the Soft Drinks Industry Levy (£340million raised in first year)^{xix}. This was an item of suggested spend in the revenue committed through the Levy to the Healthy Pupils Capital Fund, but the monitoring has not systematically focused on the impact of fountains funded.

ⁱ Plastic Bottles: Turning Back the Plastic Tide. 19 December 2017. Parliamentary Environmental Audit Committee. <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201719/cmselect/cmenvaud/339/339.pdf>

ⁱⁱ Plastic Bottles: Turning Back the Plastic Tide. 19 December 2017. Parliamentary Environmental Audit Committee. <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201719/cmselect/cmenvaud/339/339.pdf>

ⁱⁱⁱ Plastic Bottles: Turning Back the Plastic Tide. 19 December 2017. Parliamentary Environmental Audit Committee. <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201719/cmselect/cmenvaud/339/339.pdf>

^{iv} Soft Drinks Industry Levy: 12 things you should know. 18 August 2016. Gov.UK <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/soft-drinks-industry-levy-12-things-you-should-know>

^v Sugar Reduction: The evidence for Action. October 2015. Public Health England. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/470179/Sugar_reduction_The_evidence_for_action.pdf

^{vi} Sugar Reduction: The evidence for Action. October 2015. Public Health England. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/470179/Sugar_reduction_The_evidence_for_action.pdf

^{vii} Sugar Reduction: The evidence for Action. October 2015. Public Health England. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/470179/Sugar_reduction_The_evidence_for_action.pdf

^{viii} Water Water Everywhere 2018: Moving from Awareness to Action on Single-Use Plastic Bottles. April 2018. Keep Britain Tidy. <https://www.keepbritaintidy.org/sites/default/files/resources/Water%20Water%20Everywhere%202018%20Report%20WEB.pdf>

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- ^{ix} Every Child a Healthy Weight. September 2019. London Child Obesity Taskforce.
https://www.london.gov.uk/sites/default/files/every_child_a_healthy_weight.pdf (p28 on drinking fountains)
- ^x Time to Solve Child Obesity: an independent report by the Chief Medical Officer. October 2019. Office of The Chief Medical Officer.
https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/837907/cmo-special-report-childhood-obesity-october-2019.pdf (fountains in Annex A, p4 & Annex E, p8)
- ^{xi} A Green Future: Our 25 Year Plan to Improve the Environment. Jan 2018. HM Government.
https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/693158/25-year-environment-plan.pdf (p88 on Refill)
- ^{xii} 50 Fountains Challenge homepage. September 2019. Sustain and City to Sea.
<https://www.sustainweb.org/50fountains>
- ^{xiii} Southwark Commits to 50 Fountains Challenge. September 2019. Sugar Smart.
https://www.sugarsmartuk.org/news/sep19_southwark_drinking_water_fountains/
- ^{xiv} Drinking Water Fountains: A How to Guide. September 2019. Sustain and City to Sea.
https://www.sustainweb.org/publications/drinking_water_fountains/?section=
- ^{xv} 50 Fountains Challenge Frequently Asked Questions. September 2019. Sustain and City to Sea.
<https://www.sustainweb.org/50fountains/faqs/>
- ^{xvi} A guide to installing drinking fountains. 2019. One Less (ZSL, Forum for the Future, Thames Estuary Partnership and IPSO) https://www.onelessbottle.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/14/2019/07/ZSL00084-OneLess-Fountain-Toolkit_WEB.pdf
- ^{xvii} Children’s Health Fund. 2017. Sustain. <https://www.sustainweb.org/childrenshealthfund/>
- ^{xviii} Drinking water fountains should become as iconic as the red British telephone box. March 2018. The Daily Telegraph. <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2018/03/24/drinking-water-fountains-should-become-iconic-red-british-telephone/>
- ^{xix} Spending Review fails to confirm how Sugary Drinks Tax income will be spent. September 2019. Sustain.
https://www.sustainweb.org/news/sep19_csr/