



Southern Water takes a long-term view on single-use plastics

In March 2018, Southern Water published its Plastics Policy – an industry-leading stance on what became, arguably, the most topical environmental issue of the year. Samuel Underwood, the company’s Stakeholder Manager for Hampshire and the Isle of Wight, explains what the company is doing in-house and in its communities to reduce reliance on single-use plastics and tackle the issue of microplastics – as part of its mission to protect and improve the environment.

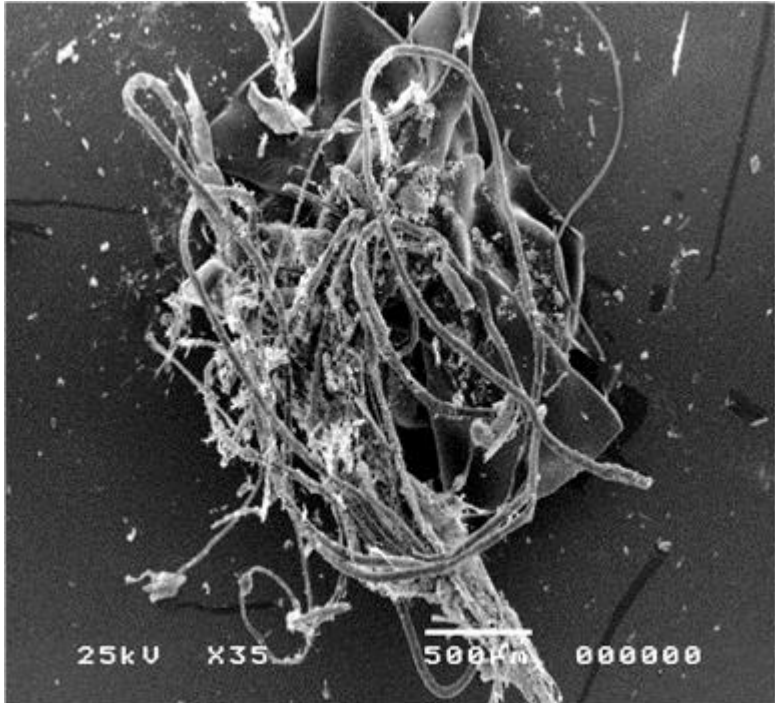


When single-use was named “word of the year 2018” by Collins Dictionary, it was hardly a surprise. Over the year, our newspapers, TV screens and social media feeds have been crammed with stories about animals dying after being entangled in, or eating, plastic in our rivers and seas. Meanwhile, other stories told how plastic was found in various ecosystems, animals and foods – with single-use plastics often identified as the culprit.

But at the end of 2017, before that momentous final episode of Blue Planet II, few of us can claim to have really understood what impact our actions – particularly our use of plastics – were having on a global scale. It was the same in Southern Water too. While our brilliant Unflushables campaign continued to highlight the problem of sewer blockages caused by wet wipes and sanitary products, the company had no public position on microplastics – despite being a key link in the “from source to sea” chain.

Although we’re not the source of plastics in the marine environment, we recognise that water companies are a link in the chain and have an opportunity to intervene. While screens at wastewater treatment works are designed to remove large items of debris, such as wet wipes, from the wastewater flows they receive, they are not designed to remove

microplastics or nanoplastics such as clothing fibres. This is because the issue of microplastics in wastewater is still being properly understood and, until it is, it is difficult to introduce meaningful regulation or legislation. As a result, there are currently no requirements regarding plastics in treated wastewater or the agricultural fertiliser we return to farmland. Rather than waiting for legislation to catch up with the problem – we're taking an active role in helping better understand the sources of plastic from the wastewater treatment process, its impact on the environment and what we can do about it.



The first step was to get our own house in order, so in March 2018 we published our Plastics Policy. It sets out our commitment to reducing single-use plastics in our offices, our operations, our supply chain and our communities and pledges to fund research and pilot projects for removing microplastics at our sites.

I chair the monthly steering group which oversees the policy and our progress and I'm proud to say that we've achieved a lot already. All our employees were given aluminium water bottles and we're cutting out single-use plastics, where possible, across our business. For example, we're now accepting reusable cups in our cafés and using about 75% fewer disposable coffee cups as a result. We've carried out an audit of our use of plastics and are using the results to set targets for reduction and we're also sponsoring academic studies into plastics in wastewater to help inform and devise potential solutions. We've also rolled out a plastics training programme to raise awareness with colleagues and we're working with our supply chain to encourage them to reduce plastic waste too.

The next step is getting out into our communities to promote simple things people can do such as supporting the brilliant Refill water bottle filling campaign. This includes working with the various environmental groups, including the Rivers Trusts, which sit on our region's Catchment Partnerships to devise joint projects and campaigns in the future. Our efforts are a step in the right direction but, of course, a drop in the ocean of the wider problem so it's great to see so many other organisations taking action. The issue of plastics looks daunting because it's bigger than any of us, but it's not bigger than all of us combined.