Boosting public water access for a plastic-free future:

The case for improved access to public drinking water

BRITA

Foreword

Let's be clear on the environmental cost of single-use bottled water. They take five seconds to make, five minutes to use, and a staggering 500 years to break down. As well as littering our streets and countryside, single-use plastic bottles pollute rivers and choke our seas.

Ten million single-use plastic bottles of water are sold in the UK every day, despite the fact that the country boasts some of the best-quality drinking water in the world. The big bottled water companies want you to think that recycling is the answer, but just under half of all plastic bottles used are either littered, landfilled or incinerated. We need to reduce and reuse before we recycle.

We support the Environment Secretary Steve Reed MP's ambition for the UK to become a zero-waste economy by 2050. To make that a reality we must start planning for a plastic-free future. It's time to phase out single-use plastic on our high streets and at our sporting events. BRITA is already leading the way with our campaign for greater public access to water fountains and through our partnership with the LTA to take the plastic waste out of British tennis.

Polling shows that 70% of adults say they would be happy to reach for a reusable bottle instead of buying single-use water bottles if it was easier to refill in public spaces. We've seen some great efforts from Combined Authorities and Metro Mayors to install networks of drinking water fountains in busy and accessible areas of our cities. But if we want cleaner, healthier, pollution-free towns, cities and new developments we need better infrastructure across the country.

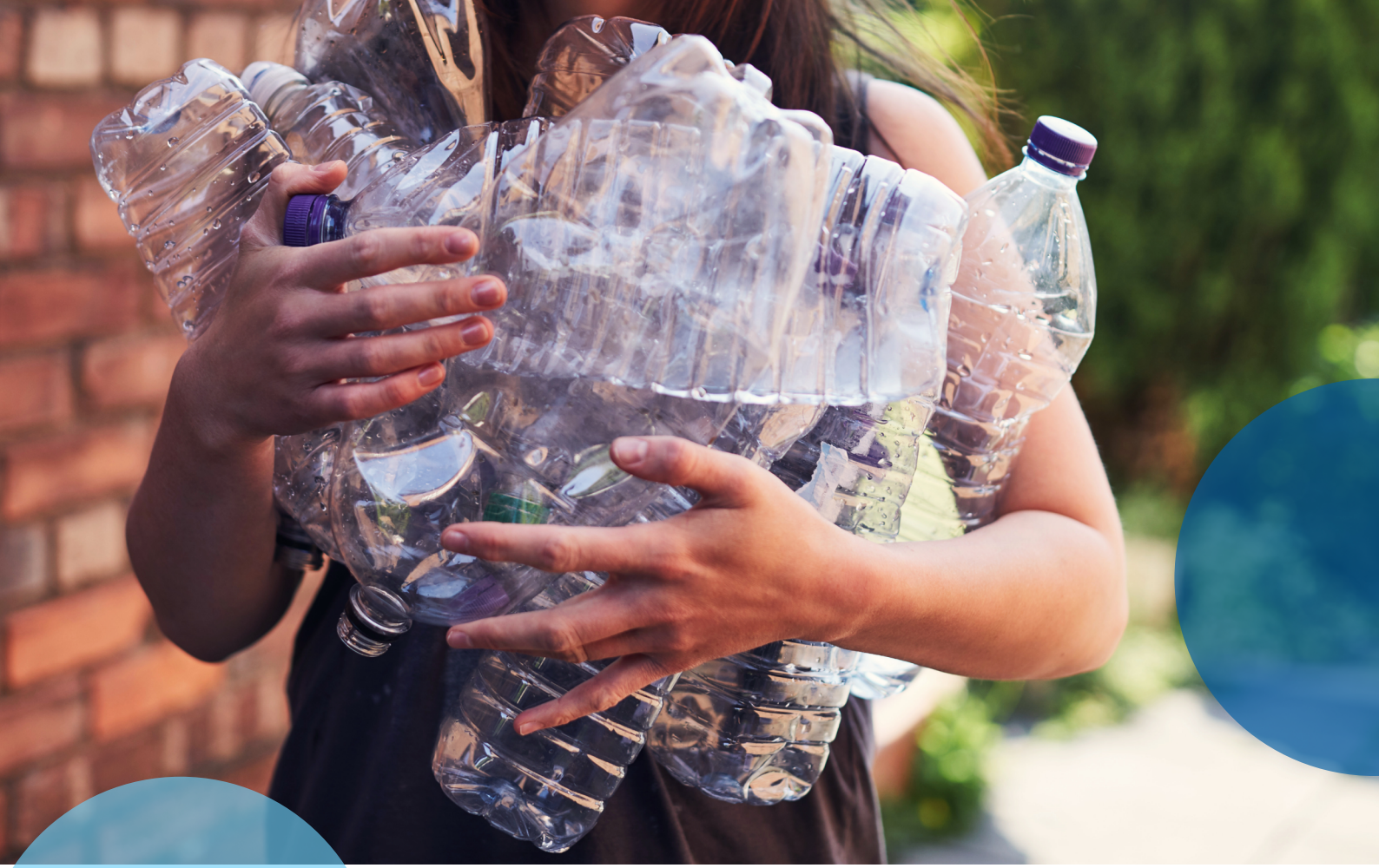
That's why we launched the 'Reach for the Reusable' campaign to call on the Government to update planning guidance to roll out water refill points in new developments across the country. This paper sets out some of the great work already being done around the country to improve public access to water and it sets out BRITA's policy asks to Government to support the UK's transition to a circular and waste-free future. We hope that these policy proposals inspire change at a local and national level to make it easier for citizens to reach for the reusables.

David Hall, UK Managing Director BRITA

Let's reach for the reusable

The right infrastructure must be in place to allow consumers to reach for reusables instead of disposable plastic bottles. Over half of UK consumers purchase bottled water because of its availability and convenience. This is largely because there is a lack of access to drinking water in public spaces.
BRITA is committed to reducing single-use plastic waste by mainstreaming a culture of refill and reuse. In October 2023, we launched the 'Reach for the Reusable' campaign in Parliament, calling for policy change to drive greater access to public water refill points to make it easier for citizens to reach for reusable water bottles.

This paper outlines the results of our research into the case for increasing public water fountain networks to reduce plastic waste in our cities and concludes with our recommendations for policymakers.



Drivers of change

1. We're drowning in single-use plastic. Let's turn off the tap.

Plastic pollution is a major global environmental problem. It is choking our rivers and oceans, harming wildlife and ending up in the food on our dinner plates. Single-use plastic bottles are one of the most prevalent sources of plastic pollution. Over 80% of the rubbish found in our oceans is plastic - and plastic bottles are the second most commonly found item.

It's clear that our world is experiencing a plastic crisis. Yet every year, 3.5 billion bottles of water are still sold in the UK, with effective marketing and branding strategies employed by bottled water companies playing a crucial role in emphasising the purity, quality, and refreshing attributes of bottled water, resonating with consumers and arousing desirability.

Fifty years ago, bottled water simply wasn't a thing. Water came out of the tap, with no need to pay extra for it. There was no demand for it until drinks companies decided to create one. Fast forward to now, and bottled water still, somehow, reigns supreme around the world, leaving in its wake a plastics problem of mountainous proportions.

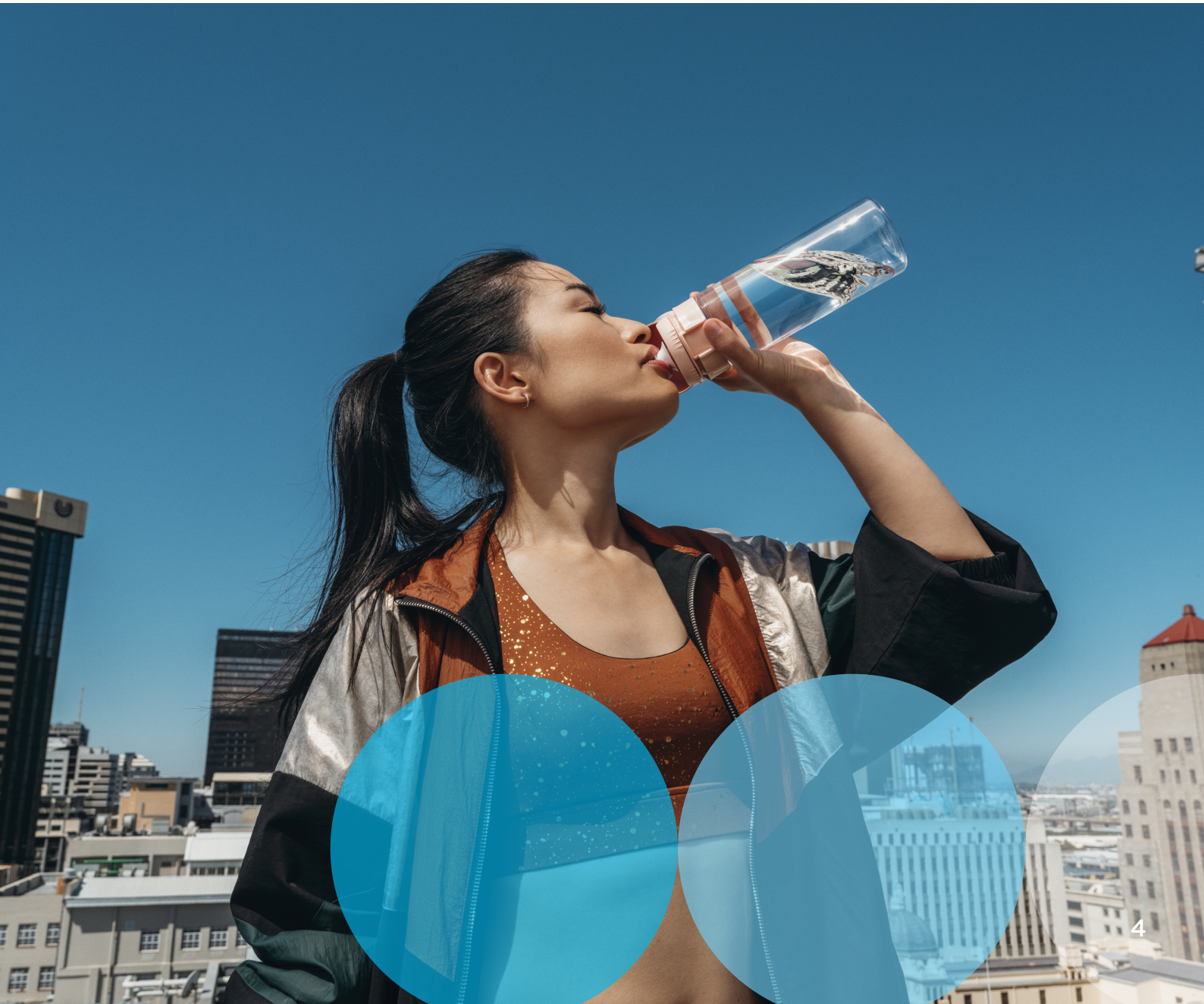
Currently, a staggering 10 million plastic bottles are sold every day in the UK, with the majority of these bottles ending up in landfill or throughout our oceans. In the UK, 5.5 billion plastic bottles escape household recycling collection every year. They are littered, landfilled or incinerated. Of these bottles, 55% (approximately 3 billion) are incinerated and 45% (approximately 2.5 billion) are landfilled every year. The production of one single-use 500ml plastic bottle can produce around 82.8 grams of carbon dioxide.

The production, recycling or incineration of these disposable bottles produces hundreds of thousands of tonnes of climate-changing emissions in the UK each year. Plastic bottles and other items also break down into micro-plastic pollution. This is now so prevalent that it is present in the air, soil, oceans, our bodies and the bodies of animals. The risks to human health are yet unknown.

Ultimately, our collective over-production and consumption of single-use plastic must stop if we are to protect our health and environment and move to a more circular resource-efficient economy.

While recycling has been widely promoted to manage plastic waste, it is increasingly evident that it alone is insufficient to address the magnitude of the problem. According to the 2024 Big Plastic Count, a campaign by Greenpeace and Everyday Plastic, the UK recycling rate of plastic is just 17%, while households throw away an estimated 1.7 billion pieces of plastic a week.

Embracing reuse over single-use helps mitigate the environmental impact of plastic production and disposal, conserves resources, and fosters a greater sense of responsibility towards our planet among consumers.



2. Our climate is changing. We need to adapt now.

In 2022, the UK issued its first-ever Level 4 Heat-Health Alert as a temperature of over 40°C was recorded for the first time. The Chair of Adaptation at the Climate Change Committee (CCC) Baroness Brown has said that "by 2050, that will be a very typical summer. That will [likely] be an average summer rather than an exceptional summer."

The CCC uses 45 adaptation outcomes as indicators of the UK's performance on adaptation. To date, there is little evidence to show the UK is acting at a rate required to manage the risks. The CCC said:

"While the recognition of a changing climate within planning and policy is increasing, with some policy in most areas, it is clear that the current approach to adaptation policy is not leading to delivery on the ground and significant policy gaps remain."

With temperature records being broken on an almost annual basis now, access to drinking water in public spaces will undoubtedly increase in priority for local authorities across the country. Policymakers can help prepare for this warmer future by providing more public drinking water points to keep people safe and hydrated, without needing to purchase single-use plastic water bottles.

Local authorities would also benefit greatly, with a significant burden relieved from waste services. Chiefly in public areas, the amount of waste would be reduced, with cost savings and environmental benefits, as councils look towards Net Zero. For residents, reducing the amount of waste and pollution littering the streets would make healthier, cleaner urban areas.

3. Local and global policy levers

To tackle plastic and waste, the previous UK Government set targets to:

- eliminate avoidable plastic waste by the end of 2042;
- halve the amount of residual waste we produce per person by 2042;
- significantly reduce and, where possible, prevent marine plastic pollution – in particular, material that came originally from land.

The current Environment Secretary Steve Reed MP has made it a priority to clean up our rivers and our seas, and has instructed his officials at the Department for Environment Food and Rural Affairs to produce a roadmap towards a zero waste UK by 2050.

All three of Parliament's cross-party environmental select committees have made recommendations that support BRITA's policy position. In 2017 the then Environmental Audit Committee (EAC) released a report called Plastic Bottles: Turning Back the Plastic Tide, which called on the Government to increase the provision of water fountains. It concluded that:

"To reduce the 7.7 billion plastic water bottles used each year in the UK, a culture of carrying re-usable bottles should be embedded through the provision of public water fountains and access to free tap water. We call upon the Government to introduce a regulation for all premises which serve food or drink to provide free drinking water upon request, including sports centres and leisure centres. The Government should review the health and litter-reducing benefits of providing public water fountains and amend the Water Industry Act 1991 to give water companies formal powers to erect water fountains. These actions could cut usage of plastic water bottles by 65%."

At the global level, in November 2024 we will see the culmination of the UN Global Plastics Treaty negotiations to agree on a legally binding international instrument to curb plastic pollution. We need both supply and demand side change. We need legally binding targets to limit the growth in plastic production and reduce demand for wasteful and polluting single-use plastics. If successful, the new treaty will be akin to a Paris Agreement for plastic pollution.

Signatory countries must then come forward with ambitious nationally determined targets to meet the global goal. Governments like the UK will likely need to do more to mainstream a culture of reuse and refill and help citizens reach for reusable. BRITA is helping to lead this culture change with its campaign for greater public access to water fountains and its partnership with the LTA to support taking single-use plastic waste out of British tennis.

Local and Combined Authorities leading the way

While plastic reduction is an international problem, councils across the UK are demonstrating leadership by providing local solutions to encourage a greater culture of reuse and refill.

As part of our research, we interviewed three authorities: Greater Manchester Combined Authority (GMCA), Greater London Authority and Richmond and Wandsworth Council to understand the successes and challenges they have experienced with water fountain infrastructure.

GMCA has installed water fountains across Bury and Prestwich, with funding for some provided by private sector partners. These fountains are located in high-footfall areas, including libraries and parks. This physical fountain approach is bolstered by the City to Sea Refill app to connect residents with cafes, shops and restaurants that will happily fill up bottles for free.

Greater London Authority has installed 110 water fountains to date with partner Thames Water responsible for the maintenance and cleaning of the structures.

Richmond and Wandsworth Council has installed water fountains in 11 public spaces including parks and recreation grounds. The authority also benefits from the Greater London Authority programme with fountains at key transport hubs across the borough.

Key Findings

Plastic reduction policies and pledges

The Greater Manchester Combined Authority (GMCA) Plastic Pact was one of the first and boldest Pacts to commit to reducing single-use plastics from the public sector by the end of 2024. The Pact was signed in 2019 by public bodies across Greater Manchester including its 10 Local Authorities, Greater Manchester Fire and Rescue Service and the NHS Foundation Trust. It includes supporting new initiatives to reduce single-use plastics and increase recycling and reuse across the public sector. The Pact included an initiative called PlasticFreeGM asking businesses, organisations and individuals to pledge to take action to reduce avoidable single-use plastics across Greater Manchester.

Increasing access to water fountains was a key element to support the success of the pledge. The Combined Authority partnered with the campaigning group City to Sea to create refill destinations across Greater Manchester. City to Sea runs Refill, the location-based app that connects people looking for water, with thousands of local businesses, transport hubs and public spaces where they can refill for free.

Richmond and Wandsworth Council is charged with leading plastic policy development for all London Boroughs as part of the One World Living programme, a climate initiative that aims to reduce London's consumption-based emissions across plastics, textiles, food and electricals by two-thirds by 2030 . The Council will include a plastics pledge with commitments for the Borough to reduce single-use plastic consumption and waste.

Maintenance of water fountains

While there was little resistance to rolling out a network of water fountains, all three authorities interviewed stated maintenance as the biggest barrier to water fountain installations. The price of setting them up is not necessarily an issue, however, issues with vandalism and upkeep contributed to the overall running costs of the programmes.

GMCA noted that the maintenance costs were considered too high to be viable stating vandalisation issues had contributed to high maintenance costs. Consequently, the GMCA is exploring alternative opportunities, including working with partners or offering sponsorship to make the commissioning of a greater network more economically viable.

Richmond and Wandsworth Council expressed that maintenance is the biggest barrier to fountain installation and upkeep and had decided not to progress with further installation of fountains.
The Thames Water fountains in the capital are not immune to vandalisation challenges, however, they took precautions on the location of the fountains considering criteria such as visibility and proximity to CCTV cameras to try to prevent issues. Less than 10% of the fountains have been vandalised in London.

The state of public drinking water infrastructure in the UK

The state of public water fountain infrastructure in the UK reveals a need for significant improvement to support accessible drinking water and to promote a reuse culture to become mainstream. Many of the UK's water fountains have been allowed to fall into a state of disrepair. According to a study by QS Supplies, the UK ranks 53rd globally on the number of public fountains, with just 2.08 per 100,000 people. This scarcity highlights a critical gap in infrastructure that limits the public's ability to conveniently access free water, thereby perpetuating the reliance on single-use plastic bottles. Enhancing the network of public water fountains is essential for mainstreaming a reuse culture, encouraging the use of refillable water bottles, and reducing plastic waste across the nation.

Recommendations

Mainstreaming a culture of reuse and refill has many benefits, from access to free water to litter prevention. Furthermore, it could help the Government meet its waste and resources targets, cut carbon emissions, adapt to climate change, and reduce the plastic pollution in our rivers and seas.

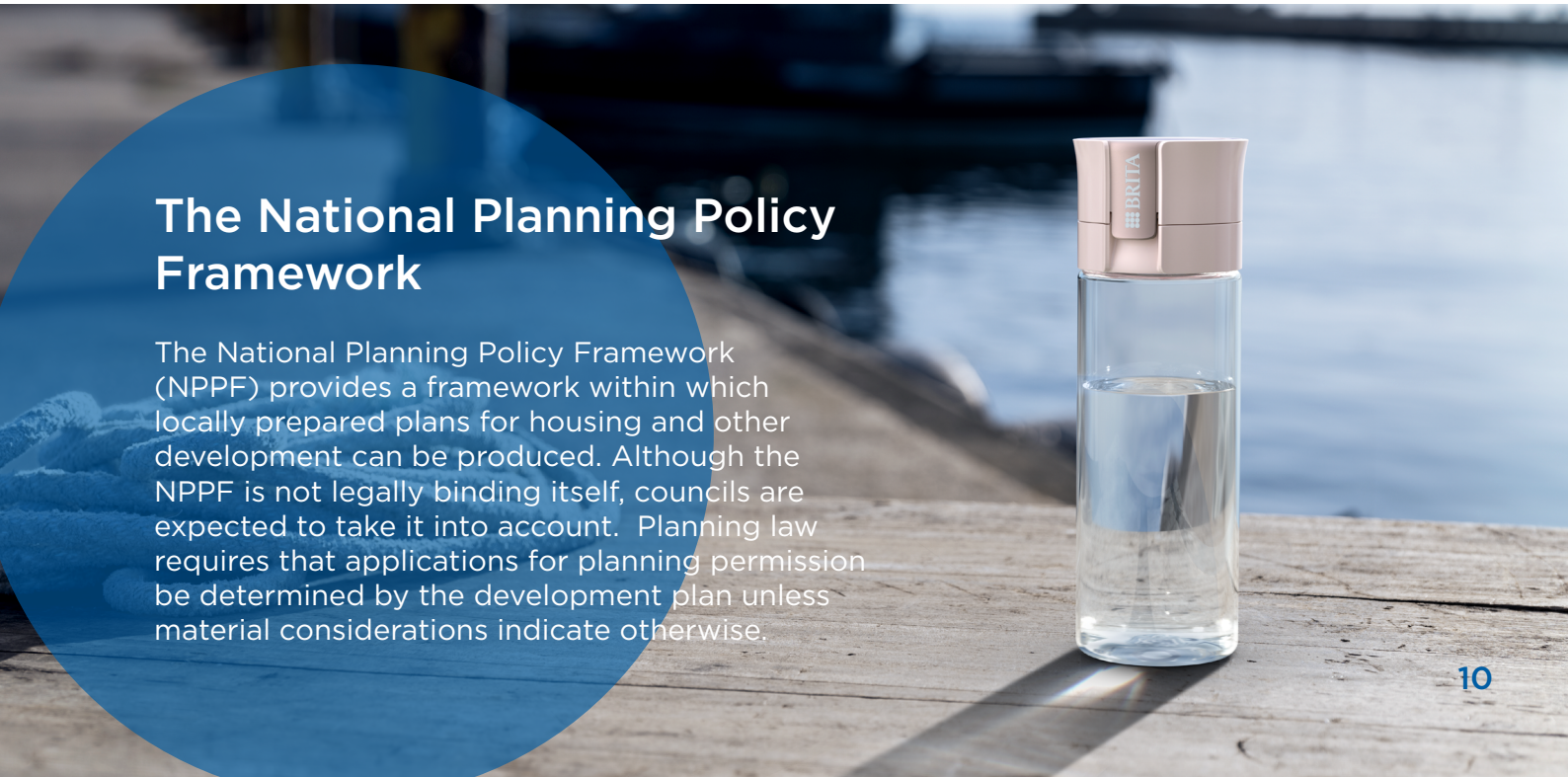
We have three key recommendations for policymakers to bolster a culture of reuse and reduce our reliance on single-use plastic:

1. Planning without plastic

The combined challenge of climate change and plastic pollution requires us to think differently about how we plan our towns and cities. By updating planning guidelines through the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF), the Government can influence planning decisions at the local level. Local and Combined Authorities can also use Local Plans to ensure that towns and cities are equipped with water fountains to cope with hotter summers and make plastic litter and waste a problem of the past.

With an understanding of the impacts of climate adaptation, the NPPF is the strongest political lever that will have the biggest impact on driving behaviour change towards a reuse culture. A planning policy requiring water fountains to be considered in all public spaces (i.e. parks, recreation grounds, community facilities) will ensure fountains and public access to water become standard practice for all new developments and cement the UK as a leader in this space. The NPPF's Planning for Climate Change guidance currently contains no mention of greater access to water in our towns and cities as extreme heat waves become more frequent and summer demand for water increases. Currently, there are no requirements for infrastructure to be built and planned to ensure citizens can adopt zero-waste lifestyles to reduce the emissions and pollution that come with reliance on single-use items like plastic bottles.

The new Government is committed to changing planning rules, and it is consulting on changes to the National Planning Policy Framework.



The National Planning Policy Framework

The National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) provides a framework within which locally prepared plans for housing and other development can be produced. Although the NPPF is not legally binding itself, councils are expected to take it into account. Planning law requires that applications for planning permission be determined by the development plan unless material considerations indicate otherwise.

We recommend the Government update the Planning for Climate Change policy statement to explicitly include guidance to Local Authorities to require developers to provide water refill points at appropriate sites of high footfall and social interaction – such as playgrounds, squares, high streets, and public transport hubs. This change to the guidance would place the onus on developers to cover the capital cost of installation.

Such an update would help adapt our towns and cities to a changing climate and enable the behaviour change necessary to meet the UK's environmental targets. This will help meet the sustainable development objective within the NPPF by minimising waste and pollution and mitigating and adapting to climate change. It will also help Local Authorities who currently have to deal with the waste caused by disposable plastic water bottles. The collection and disposal of waste is one of the biggest costs for local authorities.

2. Mandating water companies to maintain water fountains

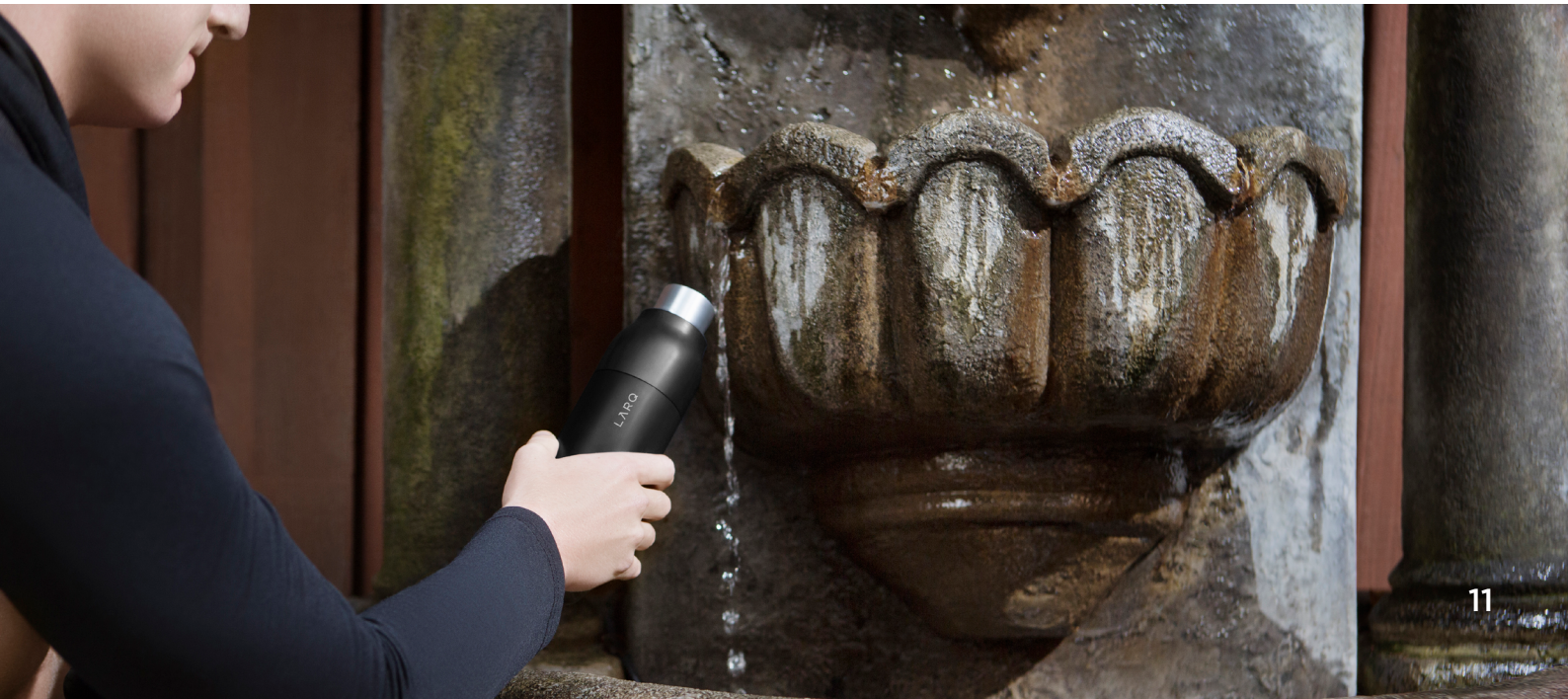
Maintenance costs were cited as a key barrier to sustaining water fountain projects by the Authorities we interviewed as part of this research. The London model where Thames Water maintain the network of fountains provides a model for covering the maintenance costs.

When the Government next updates its strategic priorities for water regulator Ofwat, it should consider mandating water companies to provide networks of refill points in urban areas to ensure they are supporting the UK's efforts to adapt to rising temperatures and move to a zero-waste economy.

3. Private sector partnerships

GMCA has success in working with a private sector business to fund the installation and maintenance of the water fountains. This model could be replicated across other Authorities. Funding water fountains can be a unique way for responsible businesses to demonstrate their commitment to solving environmental problems in their local community and create a proof point for their commitment to reducing plastic waste. Funding programmes could be tied to wider plastic reduction pledges, including the programme GMCA introduced encouraging businesses to pledge to reduce their footprints.

One respondent also explored the option of corporate sponsorship or advertising on water fountains to fund maintenance costs.

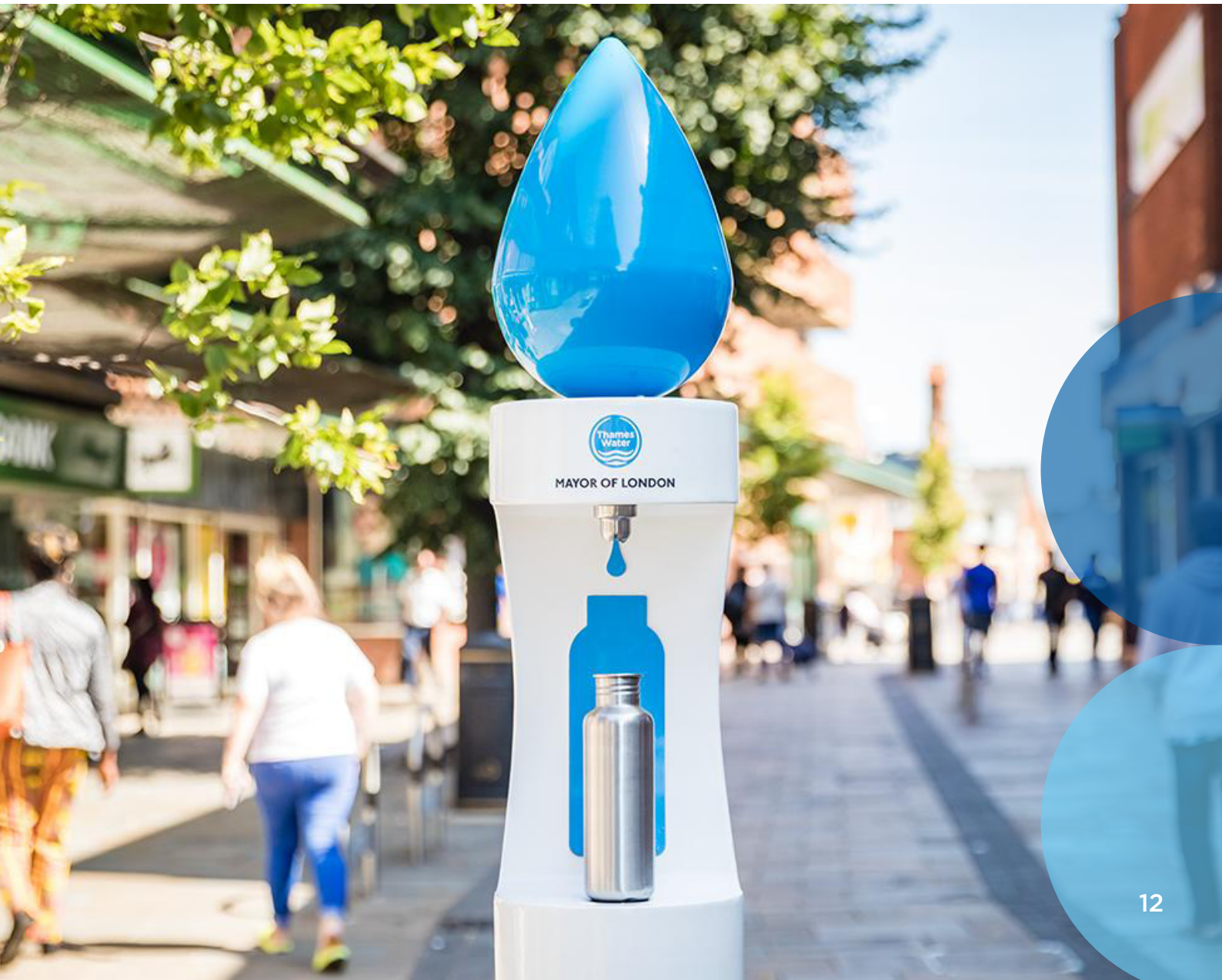


Case Study 1- Thames Water and the Mayor of London save over 5.6m plastic bottles

In October 2018, the Mayor announced his £5 million partnership with Thames Water to install over 100 fountains across London in Spring 2019. Initially, £2.5 million was invested to install 100 drinking water fountains in busy and accessible areas of London. To date, 110 fountains have been installed. As part of the agreement Thames Water owns, maintains and cleans the fountains.

The campaign is the biggest single-use plastic reduction initiative of any city across the UK.

Thames Water has smart meters on all the fountains and reported 2.8 million litres of water dispensed, replacing around 5.6 million single-use plastic bottles illustrating a clear positive impact. The GLA also reported positive feedback from boroughs across London.



Case Study 2 - Serving sustainable solutions at the LTA, game, set, and match!

In 2024 we became the official water partner of the LTA – the first non-single-use water brand to sponsor British tennis. Our joint mission is to remove all single-use plastic water bottles from the LTA's major events. We are providing water across the ATP and WTA events in Nottingham, Birmingham, Eastbourne and The Queen's Club in London via BRITA dispensers and refillable bottles to players, officials, and ticket holders, with refill stations courtside, in player lounges, and in public areas.

Through our partnership we share a joint commitment to promote sustainability in British tennis, demonstrating how to effectively remove single-use plastic water bottles without impacting players' or punters' experience and paving the way for a new era of environmental responsibility at tournaments.

The early results of this partnership are already impressive. We aimed to eliminate 100,000 single-use bottles from this year's tournaments. We're pleased to report that we exceeded our targets, dispensing 110,800 litres of water, saving the equivalent of over 220,000 single-use plastic bottles.

However, both BRITA and the LTA are keen to go further and continue making a positive impact on both the sport and across society.

Scott Lloyd, LTA Chief Executive said,

'Environmental changes are impacting tennis at all levels and it's vital we all play our part to secure the sport for future generations. We are delighted to have BRITA on board, the first ever non-single-use water brand to sponsor tennis in Britain, with this partnership demonstrating the viability of sustainable alternatives for major sporting events and, by taking a huge stride towards eliminating single-use plastic from our events, underlining the LTA's ambition to be a leader in sport for sustainability.'

BRITA

www.brita.co.uk