

Plastics: the best will comply and the rest will free r...

Published: January 13, 2026, 4:56 am

U.K. supermarkets and related businesses [are announcing today](#) that they have set themselves a target of ensuring all plastic that they use can be recycled by 2025.

I welcome the news. It would be churlish not to do so.

At the same time, I despair at it. This is a voluntary code. There are no sanctions. And no enforceable disclosure requirements that I have seen reported.

For reasons that have been obvious since the 1970s, when Friends of the Earth began highlighting the issue, plastics are a major problem and threat to our planet, whatever their uses might be. It has taken until 2018 to get supermarkets to recognise the issue. And there is no certainty that they will now deliver on their promises.

The reality is that voluntary codes ultimately rarely work well. The best comply. The rest free ride. This is why we do not have voluntary funding for government. We have taxes instead. Even then we still get abuse, but it's less than it otherwise might be.

The lesson needs to be pointed out. When an issue is important there is no room for voluntary codes: law is required. This is the case here.

Michael Gove will trot along to applaud this morning as these supermarkets launch their Code. But the case for stronger action is already known on this issue. It should be Gove in the lead. He isn't. And that's why the celebration should be decidedly muted. Real action - legally backed - has to follow.