



Jo Swinson MP

Excess Packaging: Are your Christmas gifts over-wrapped?

We all enjoy giving and receiving presents on Christmas day, and unwrapping them is half the fun. But at the end of the day, do you ever feel like you're having to throw away more packaging than is necessary?

Excess packaging is costly and damaging to the environment. The law says that manufacturers must minimise the amount of packaging on their products, and yet the Government has made little effort to enforce those laws.

Children's toys provide some of the most egregious examples of excess packaging. As the nation finished off its last-minute Christmas shopping, a trip to Hamley's in Oxford Circus showed some of the best and worst examples to highlight in this report.

Why does excess packaging matter?

- Whenever you buy over-packaged goods, you are paying for the packaging as well as the product. UK Government's Waste Resources Action Programme (WRAP) says that families in the UK now spend some £470 on packaging each year – one sixth of their food budget.¹
- The more packaging your Christmas presents have, the more space they take up, which means it takes more lorries to transport them from the manufacturer to the shops, increasing their carbon footprint.
- The UK sends around 5 million tonnes of packaging waste to landfill each year.² Landfill sites produce methane, which is twenty times as dangerous a greenhouse gas as carbon dioxide.
- Not only is landfill waste bad for the environment, but you pay tax on it - every household is currently paying £30 a year in landfill taxes alone.³
- To meet EU targets, the UK will have to reduce the amount waste going to landfill by 50% by 2013. If the target is not met – and it is looking unlikely –the Government will fine local Councils £150 per tonne over the limit, and taxpayers will foot the bill, to the tune of between £8 million to £366 million.⁴
- Instead of sending waste to landfill, some Councils incinerate it instead. Burning household waste produces energy, but is also a big source of carbon emissions - by 2020 it is predicted that electricity-only incinerators will emit 78 per cent more fossil CO₂ than gas power stations and only around 5 per cent less than a coal power station.⁵

What does the law say?

The Packaging (Essential Requirements) Regulations – UK laws introduced following an EU Directive - require all packaging put on the market to meet certain minimum standards, including:

- Packaging should be designed such that its volume and weight be limited to the minimum amount necessary for safety, hygiene and acceptance by consumers.
- Packaging should be designed and produced to permit its reuse or recovery, including recycling, and to minimise the impact on the environment of any waste.⁶

Since this legislation was introduced in 2003, only four prosecutions have taken place.⁷

¹ Women's Environmental Network, 2004: http://www.wen.org.uk/waste/Reports/Low_packaging_aisles_policy.pdf

² DEFRA, *Waste Strategy factsheets: Packaging*:
<http://www.defra.gov.uk/ENVIRONMENT/waste/strategy/factsheets/packaging.htm>

³ Local Government Association, 2009: <http://www.lga.gov.uk/lga/core/page.do?pageId=1720354>

⁴ National Audit Office, *Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs: Managing the waste PFI programme*, 2009:
http://www.nao.org.uk/publications/0809/managing_the_waste_pfi_program.aspx

⁵ Friends of the Earth, *Dirty Truths: Incineration and Climate Change*, 2006:
http://www.foe.co.uk/resource/briefings/dirty_truths.pdf

⁶ Packaging (Essential Requirements) Regulations 2003: <http://www.opsi.gov.uk/si/si2003/20031941.htm>

⁷ Jo Swinson, *Excess Packaging: Trading Standards Survey*, 2008:
<http://www.joswinson.org.uk/resources/sites/217.160.173.25-4064151b9ce785.55373887/Trading+Standards+survey+report.doc>

The good...



Cuddly toys need very little in the way of packaging because they're soft and not easily breakable. A small cardboard tag is enough to give all the necessary washing and safety advice.

...and the bad



Many soft toys come with big cardboard boxes which are wasteful and totally unnecessary – all they do is take up more space on the shelves.



These Uno cards are a good example of minimal packaging with easily recyclable materials. The cards can be stored in their cardboard boxes and nothing needs to go in the bin.



There is no reason why these cards need to come in a plastic blister pack – it is not so widely recycled and will be instantly thrown away.



These toy swords need no more than a small cardboard tag...



...and yet many similar toys come in large cardboard boxes with plastic inside. Even where some packaging is needed to protect the toys during transit, the boxes could often be made much smaller, and could be made entirely out of widely recycled material such as cardboard.



Sometimes the good old-fashioned toys are the best. These marbles come with a small fabric bag which they can be stored in, creating no waste at all...



...yet other classic favourites have been repackaged purely for show. This is certainly not the minimum necessary packaging for a Rubik's cube.

What must be done?

These few examples demonstrate that while some manufacturers are keeping their packaging to the minimum necessary, as the law requires, others are more concerned with filling up shelf-space and creating eye-catching displays. So what can be done to cut down on packaging, cut prices and cut greenhouse emissions?

- **Raise awareness** – many people may not know that there are laws regulating excess packaging, or that they can raise complaints with their local Trading Standards office.
- **Give Trading Standards real clout** – a survey of Trading Standards offices I conducted in 2008 revealed that most of them do not have the resources to follow up complaints about excess packaging.
- **Strengthen the law** – the requirement to produce the “minimum adequate amount” of packaging is open to interpretation and therefore difficult to enforce, a key factor in the lack of priority given to packaging violations by Trading Standards.
- **Back it up with real sanctions** – fines for flouting the law must be high enough to be a deterrent to large companies with multi-million pound profits.
- **Make retailers responsible** – if customers could leave all packaging they consider excessive at the door before they even leave the shop, retailers would learn how much packaging is really necessary and have an incentive to reduce it.

In a Parliamentary debate in 2008, the then Environment Minister Joan Ruddock told me that the Government accepts that current legislation on packaging is not working.⁸ Yet, since then, the Government has made no attempt to reform the law or improve its enforcement. The five action points outlined above offer the beginnings of a plan to cut excess packaging, and I am calling on this Government – and the next - to make this an important priority. Ultimately, it is steps like these which will all add up to a plan to enable us to make the drastic cuts in greenhouse emissions which are necessary to prevent dangerous levels of climate change.



For more information on my campaign against excess packaging, please visit www.joswinson.org.uk/excesspackaging

⁸ Official Hansard Report, 24th April 2008, col. 1512:
<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200708/cmhansrd/cm080424/debtext/80424-0011.htm#08042466001046>