

Short briefing on disability, broader equalities and single use plastics

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Background

There is increasing interest in minimising the use of plastics, in particular, single-use plastics due to their detrimental environmental impact. However, in parallel, there are calls from disability and health campaigners that any measures taken should not negatively affect marginalised people. This short briefing paper begins by setting out the social model of disability which underpins much disability activism in the UK. It then moves to present the existing evidence and narratives from disabled people, and other stakeholders regarding single-use plastics.

The social model of disability

Historically disability has been considered from a medicalised perspective, whereby 'disability' resides within the individual and the medical profession's aim is to remove the illness or condition which has caused the disability. For example, efforts made by medical communities to 'cure' Autism or Aspergers Syndrome. However, this approach not only stigmatises disability and medical conditions and neglects the experiences and voiced of disabled people, it also does not recognise the disabling effects of the built and social environments which we all occupy. In response to the medical model of disability, disability theorists and activists developed the Social Model of Disability, which draws a distinction between 'impairment' (e.g. a medical condition) and disabling barriers in the environment.



(source <http://jamiehale.co.uk/disability-politics-introduction/>)

Under the social model, disability is not the condition, but the social oppression faced by those diagnosed with an impairment interacting with an environment which is not accessible or inclusive. This is why under the social model, we do not use person-first language (person with a disability), rather we say 'disabled person' to show we understand that the person is disabled by their environment not their 'impairment'. Doing so moves us away from considering the disabled person from being the problem, towards recognising the disabling effects of the environment in which people live and work. There are many models of disability however, if we use the social model of disability we can consider carefully how our actions, policies and practices might be disabling to people with impairments.

What are the implications for EPECOM and measures to reduce the use of single use plastics?

One of the main areas where single-use plastics and disability has been explored is for single-use plastic straws. Disabled people have expressed alarm at plans to ban single-use plastics straws, as for many people, they are the only suitable accessibility aid which is currently available. There is little empirical evidence either on the environmental impact of incorrectly disposed plastic straws, or their usefulness for disabled people. However, there is an emerging acknowledgement that single-use plastic straws are essential for many disabled people and for those who are in

post-operative care (Fynes, 2019). The grey literature and personal blogs allow for an analysis of existing concerns of disabled people and disability activists, with reference to single-use plastic straws. Writing in the Guardian¹ Penny Pepper argued that single-use plastic straws and disposable wipes are essential aids for her and many other disabled people. In addition, Twitter user @sarahbreanep developed the table below which sets out the usability and risks of all types of straws, demonstrating that single-use plastic straws are currently the most accessible of materials.

MANY DISABLED PEOPLE NEED PLASTIC STRAWS TO DRINK, EAT, TAKE MEDICATIONS, ETC. HERE'S HOW CURRENT ALTERNATIVE, REUSABLE OPTIONS ARE A HARM TO US.

	CHOKING HAZARD	INJURY RISK	NOT POSITIONABLE	COSTLY FOR CONSUMER	NOT HIGH-TEMP SAFE
Metal		✓	✓	✓	
Bamboo		✓	✓	✓	
Glass		✓	✓	✓	✓
Silicone			✓	✓	
Acrylic		✓	✓	✓	✓
Paper	✓		✓		✓
Pasta	✓	✓	✓		✓
Single-use					

by @sarahbreanep

*Pressure to create bio-degradable straw options that are safe for the environment AND for all disabled people should fall upon manufacturer, NOT marginalized disabled consumers.
 *Once we accept the necessity of plastic straws, we can work together on other environmental initiatives that are effective, inclusive and accessible.

While the focus has been on single-use plastic straws, far less attention has been paid to disability and broader single-use plastics, or the involvement of disabled people in the environmental movement more broadly. As Jamie Szymkowiak² notes many disabled people are also keen to champion environmental measures to protect ecosystems. Rebecca Farren³ has drawn attention to single-use plastic food packaging, with pre-prepared food being seen as a 'convenience' rather than an essential aid to independent living for many disabled people. Farren also expresses concern about the labelling of items as 'especially for disabled people' as it may create additional pressure on disabled people to prove they are disabled enough to qualify for their use.

1. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/jul/09/disabled-person-plastic-straws-baby-wipes>¹

² <https://www.greenpeace.org/usa/action-on-plastics-shouldnt-make-life-suck-for-disabled-people/>

³ <https://rebeccafarren.com/plastic-free-campaigns-are-failing-disabled-people-and-its-scary/>

Broadly the implications we can draw from these first-person accounts of single-use plastics and disability inclusion are:

1. to be mindful of the desire of many disabled people to be not only environmentally aware, but to be part of efforts to minimise the negative effects of single-use plastics on the environment
2. for some disabled people, single-use plastics form part of an accessible and inclusive environment, and there may not currently be suitable alternatives
3. labelling of items as for disabled people may increase stigma and requirements to provide evidence of impairment/disability
4. disability is a very broad category and we should be mindful of the differing needs of different groups of disabled people, and how this may interact with other sources of oppression and marginalisation such as age, gender or ethnicity.

Useful reading

Fynes, M. M. (2019). Radiologists as Changemakers: The Last Straw. *Journal of the American College of Radiology*, 16(2), 257.

<http://disabilityhorizons.com/2018/12/the-great-plastic-straw-debate-how-will-it-affect-disabled-people/>

<https://www.vox.com/first-person/2018/7/19/17587676/straws-plastic-ban-disability>

<https://edition.cnn.com/2018/07/11/health/plastic-straw-bans-disabled-trnd/index.html>

<http://jamiehale.co.uk/disability-politics-introduction/>

<https://www.gmcdp.com/beliefs-values-aims/social-model>

<https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/learning-disabilities/a-to-z/s/social-model-disability>