Top stores ready to join fight against plastic: M&S and Waitrose could back bottle deposit scheme after two other supermarkets broke ranks

- Iceland and the Co-op broke ranks to back Turn The Tide on Plastic campaign
- Historically, the chains and their trade body have lobbied against the scheme
- But it seems the organisation’s claimed unanimous opposition is now fracturing

By SEAN POULTER, CONSUMER AFFAIRS EDITOR FOR THE DAILY MAIL
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Supermarkets Marks & Spencer and Waitrose have hinted they are ready to back a deposit scheme for plastic bottles.

Pressure is growing on stores to support the idea after Iceland and the Co-op yesterday broke ranks to back the move, which is part of the Daily Mail’s Turn The Tide on Plastic campaign.

Historically, the chains and their trade body the British Retail Consortium (BRC) have lobbied against the scheme.

However, it seems the organisation’s claimed unanimous opposition is now fracturing.
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Marks & Spencer said: ‘We recognise the enormous challenges, particularly in our oceans, that the current approach to plastic use globally is causing and agree there is a need to increase recycling rates for plastic bottles by improving “out of home” recycling facilities.’

Significantly, it added: ‘We believe the mandatory deposit return scheme is an important solution to consider but also see that it may pose some challenges.’

The Environment Secretary, Michael Gove, has described the introduction of a deposit return scheme (DRS) for plastic bottles and drinks cans as a ‘great idea’.

He has set up a working group to see how the scheme would apply in England. The authorities in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland are also supportive of the move.
Hinting that they may also back the scheme, Waitrose said: ‘We do appreciate there is growing demand for a deposit return scheme, so if some form of DRS were to be introduced, we would work with the governments across the UK to consider how the scheme could operate most effectively in a supermarket setting.’

Both Morrisons and Tesco also appear to be softening their approach to the idea.

Morrisons said: ‘As a business we’re taking a hard look at how we can use less plastic and we are open-minded on the use of deposit return schemes.’

Tesco said it is taking an active part in discussions with the Government on the issue and any DRS should be as ‘easy and accessible for consumers as possible’.

The Daily Mail revealed earlier this month how the BRC has put pressure on ministers to kill off DRS. It was a key signatory of a letter from industry leaders which claimed they were ‘unanimous’ in opposition. It is now clear that this is not the case. And the group’s opposition may be further undermined by the fact the Co-op’s former chief executive, Richard Pennycook, will take over as chairman in the new year.

Meanwhile, surveys point to overwhelming public approval for DRS, with 78 per cent in favour.

Support has grown following alarming evidence from Sir David Attenborough’s Blue Planet BBC series which featured the threat posed by plastic pollution to marine creatures.

The Daily Mail’s campaigns on plastic bags, takeaway coffee cups and one-use plastic bottles have highlighted the blight to the environment caused by plastic.
Hinting that they may also back the scheme, Waitrose said: ‘We do appreciate there is growing demand for a deposit return scheme.’

An earlier campaign led the Government to commit to introducing a world-leading ban on the use of plastic microbeads in personal care products.

In other countries, such as Norway and Germany, supermarkets host reverse vending machines for used bottles which pay out vouchers that can be cashed in at tills.

Iceland, which has more than 900 stores, said it is willing to install such machines in support of trials here.

Its director for sustainability, Richard Walker, said yesterday: ‘Deposit return schemes work. Introducing a DRS may well add to our costs of doing business. However, we believe it is a small price to pay for the long term sustainability of this planet.’

‘I urge all other retailers to do the right thing and follow suit.’

Jo Whitfield, retail chief executive at the Co-op, said: ‘The Co-op is in favour of creating a deposit return scheme which increases the overall recycling of packaging.’

Other stores, so far, have adopted the BRC trade body’s line which favours relying on the existing recycling regime for household rubbish.
The BRC’s Andrew Opie said: ‘We have genuine concerns about the effectiveness of a DRS.

‘Unlike many countries with an operational DRS, the UK already benefits from kerbside recycling collections and a DRS would potentially undermine this existing system.

‘Low recycling rates and litter must be tackled head on but this needs to be done within the context of a broader approach, involving a cultural shift.’