Iceland and the Co-op have become the first supermarkets to support a bottle deposit scheme after the government sought views on the idea to reduce plastic pollution in the oceans.

The retailers came out in favour of setting up a mandatory deposit return scheme (DRS) in England and Wales as the environment secretary, Michael Gove, began to review the results of a seven-week consultation on whether to introduce a system to increase recycling rates of plastic bottles and reduce leakage into the oceans.

Other leading supermarkets, in a survey carried out by Greenpeace, were non-committal over whether to support a deposit scheme, but none appeared openly hostile. Morrisons said: “With mixed views in the industry, it may be that the government will have to decide which way to go.”

Pressure is growing on the government, retailers and consumers to increase rates of plastic bottle recycling, reduce plastic littering and cut marine pollution.

Recycling rates in the UK have flattened for five years and last year fell to 44%, according to Keep Britain Tidy. Just 57% of all plastic bottles are collected for recycling, compared with levels of up to 90% in countries that have deposit return schemes. It comes as plastic usage across the globe is surging.
Richard Walker, the director of sustainability for Iceland Foods, responding to the Greenpeace survey, said the failure in Britain to recycle up to 16m single-use plastic bottles every day was causing untold damage to oceans and wildlife.

“This cannot carry on ... deposit return schemes work. In Norway theirs has led to 96% of all bottles being returned, with similar results in other countries that have adopted a DRS. Britain urgently needs to do the same.”

At the Co-op, Jo Whitfield, the retail chief executive, said the company was a firm supporter of initiatives to boost recycling rates.

“The Co-op is in favour of creating a deposit return scheme which increases the overall recycling of packaging and significantly reduces litter and importantly helps tackle marine pollution,” she said.

The environment secretary believes a DRS could improve the recycling rate of plastic bottles and cut leakage into the oceans.

The Scottish government has said it will introduce a deposit return scheme for drinks containers but has not yet released details of how it will operate.

More than 8m tonnes of plastic are discarded into the oceans each year, putting marine wildlife under serious threat. The first global analysis of plastic use found humans have produced 8.3bn tonnes since the 1950s, with the majority ending up in landfill or polluting the oceans and other ecosystems.

In its call for views on a DRS, the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs cites far better recycling rates in South Australia and Denmark for bottles and cans (90% and almost 80% respectively), where a form of deposit return scheme operates.

Louise Edge, an oceans campaigner for Greenpeace, welcomed the backing from the two supermarket chains.

“It is possible to prevent throwaway plastic polluting our rivers and oceans, but to do this we really need companies to step up to the plate,” she said.

“Iceland and Co-op have shown some vision and set the standard – now it’s time for other companies to follow suit and start publicly backing deposit return schemes.”
In February, Coca-Cola in Europe came out in favour of a DRS and in evidence to MPs last month, Nick Brown, the company’s head of sustainability, said such a scheme needed to be UK-wide.

He said: “We have seen that other countries which have a deposit scheme have improved recovery rates of packaging and reduced littering, which is important to us.

“We understand that things need to change both with household waste collection and packaging on the go. We think a deposit scheme can work in that context.”

Meanwhile, the Natural History Museum in London has announced it will end the sale of single-use plastic water bottles at its sites to help reduce the pollution of the oceans.

Prof Ian Owens, the director of science at the museum, said: “Our plan to stop selling single-use plastic water bottles is about becoming part of the movement towards a refillable culture and doing our part to encourage a mass lifestyle change that will help reduce the deluge of plastic into our seas.”

Supermarkets’ responses to Greenpeace survey

Tesco is not hostile to changes to the current system, if the scheme is “as easy and accessible for consumers as possible” and “ensures good quality” for end use.

Waitrose believes kerbside recycling is the most effective solution but if a DRS was introduced would work with the government to consider how it would operate in a supermarket setting.

Sainsbury’s says drinks containers are only a small part of the broader waste and recycling challenge, and a more holistic approach is needed.

Morrison’s is concerned about the cost of a DRS, and says government will have to decide which way to go.

Aldi supports the British Retail Consortium position, which is against a DRS and argues for a more holistic approach.

Lidl admits return schemes have potential benefits but need to be fully analysed and evaluated and will require significant investment.

Marks & Spencer agrees there is a need to increase recycling rates for plastic bottles. It says a mandatory DRS is “an important solution to consider” but may pose challenges.