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Britain’s Deposit Return Operator Gives Drinks Companies Six Months to Clear Old Stock

Filled containers produced before Oct. 1, 2027, may remain on shelves after launch without the logo, registration or 20p deposit.

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Britain’s deposit return scheme administrator said Monday that drinks companies will have a six-month transition period when the program starts next year, easing a rule change that had raised concern about a sudden cutoff for existing stock.

Exchange for Change, the body running the scheme, said filled drinks containers produced before Oct. 1, 2027, will still be allowed to remain on sale after that date. Those containers will not need to be registered with the scheme administrator, will not need to carry the program's logo and will not be subject to the 20p deposit that consumers will pay on containers covered by the system from launch day.

The decision is designed to avoid what the organization described as a "hard cut-off" affecting millions of containers when the scheme begins. Without the change, companies had faced the prospect of switching immediately to new labeling and registration requirements from the first day of the program, with no grace period in law.

Exchange for Change said it was encouraging businesses to sell through older stock by April 2028 "to support a smooth transition." It added that, in most cases, sell-through should happen much sooner, but said that April date is not a regulatory deadline.

The announcement also set out potential flexibility for some empty packaging. A spokesman for Exchange for Change said unfilled drinks containers tied to orders placed before Oct. 1, 2027, and that would normally fall within the scheme, could also be allowed to be filled and sold after launch even if they are not fully compliant. The spokesman said that arrangement is still under discussion and would depend on approval from regulators.

"This would allow non DRS-compliant packaging to be filled and sold after launch, but only if they are associated with orders placed before 1 October 2027," the spokesman said. "Talks are ongoing, and any flexibility depends on regulators' agreement."

The body also made clear that the proposed leeway would not apply broadly. Packaging that does not meet the deposit return scheme's requirements and is not linked to an order made before Oct. 1, 2027, cannot later be filled and placed on the market, it said. That means packaging without the deposit logo and without a barcode registered with the scheme would not qualify unless it can be updated to comply.

Exchange for Change said more details on the transition arrangements will be published later.

The deposit return scheme will cover single-use drinks containers made wholly or mainly from PET plastic, aluminum or steel, with sizes from 150ml to three liters, when it goes live in October next year. Consumers will pay a refundable 20p deposit on in-scope containers.

The transition decision matters across the drinks supply chain because producers and distributors have been preparing for a major packaging change at the same time they manage existing inventories. For brewers, soft drinks makers and ready-to-drink brands in particular, the extra time could reduce pressure to relabel or withdraw pre-launch stock all at once. That may help limit disruption in warehousing, transport and retail distribution, though the final operational impact will depend on how much stock remains in circulation and on the shape of any further regulatory guidance.

The issue has been especially sensitive because the drinks sector often works with long production runs, advance packaging orders and seasonal inventory patterns. A strict day-one cutoff could have left companies with unsold containers that were legal before launch but did not meet the new marking and registration rules. The transition period gives businesses more room to clear those products through normal sales channels instead of trying to remove them immediately.

At the same time, the arrangement does not remove the need for producers to move to compliant packaging. Any containers produced for the post-launch market outside the limited flexibility described by Exchange for Change will still need to meet the scheme’s requirements, including the correct logo and scheme-registered barcode.

The Grocer had previously reported that discussions were under way over a transition period, amid concern in the industry that the absence of one could create supply chain disruption and make it harder to clear old stock before the program starts. Monday’s announcement answers part of that concern for filled containers and signals possible relief for some empty packaging already on order, although that element is still subject to regulatory approval.

The scheme is one of the most significant packaging rule changes facing the drinks market in the next year. Companies have been preparing for new operational requirements that affect production planning, packaging procurement, labeling, stock

management and retailer coordination as the launch date approaches.