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Research Study Into Consumer Plastic Recycling Behaviour 2019

A publication outlining the barriers to citizen behaviour change and increasing kerbside plastic recycling rates.

"I wish it was so much simpler, I think that it's pointlessly difficult."



RESEARCH STUDY INTO CONSUMER PLASTIC RECYCLING BEHAVIOUR 2019

Recycling of Used Plastics Limited (RECOUP) is a leading authority on plastics packaging resource management, providing expertise and guidance to a wide range of clients across the plastics supply, use and recycling chain. Set up in 1990, RECOUP is an independent charitable organisation, built on a network of members and project activities.

RECOUP works to maximise plastic and plastic packaging recycling through stimulating the development of sustainable plastics waste management, including the improvement of plastics collection and sorting activities across the UK, undertaking research and analysis to identify good practices and remove barriers to the adoption of efficient recycling systems.

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1.0 BACKGROUND

In 2018 RECOUP delivered consumer plastics recycling communication campaigns in partnership with Local Authorities under the Pledge2Recycle Plastics branding. All campaigns were branded 'Plastics Recycling – Cutting the Confusion'. A key element of these campaigns was to undertake ground level education via roadshows at community events with two-way conversations with citizens gaining insights into their perspectives on plastic recycling. Recycling competitions were used to gain insights into the understanding of plastics recycling and to evaluate key barriers and items of packaging that caused confusion.

This work indicated that consumers were confused. Despite the varying local collection arrangements across the locations visited citizens remained unsure about about similar items of packaging and whether they were classified as recyclable or not. Common items of confusion were;

- Blister pill packs.
- Toothpaste tubes.
- Food trays (i.e. what constituted a food tray) and what to do with trays that had contained meat products.
- What to do with tops (on or off), trigger sprays and pump lids (whether to be left in or out).
- How clean packaging needed to be to be acceptable.
- What to do with coloured or black plastic.

Citizens had further difficulty when it came to distinguishing what different markings or symbols on the packs indicated.



1.2 Previous Research

RECOUP conducted a survey in 2018 [1], on Consumer Attitudes and Behaviour where 34% of respondents admitted to being unsure about plastics recycling and whether items were or were not recyclable kerbside.

A further EU study with input from Germany, UK and Poland also found the key barrier to plastics recycling was uncertainty over what could be recycled. 27% [2] of the respondents in the UK said that they were not sure whether some plastics could be recycled or not, compared with only 18% of German respondents stating they were unsure about which plastics could or could not be recycled.

With around one third of the general population of the UK admitting to being uncertain of what plastics packaging could be recycled, a barrier to improving recycling rates. clearly existed.

Furthermore the 'on the ground' work highlighted, even those householders who claimed to recycle their plastics packaging kerbside and were aware generally engaged with the topic, could still get it wrong. When taking part in the Pledge2Recycle Plastics recycling quiz most participants incorrectly categorising at least one or more items.

The previous Insight Surveys and the Pledge2Recycle Plastics research indicated that further work was required to explore the reasons for this consumer confusion. In order to communicate effectively to citizens in the future we needed to understand what citizens were finding so perplexing.

While 61% [3] of respondents in the 2017 EU Consumer Insight Research said they found sending plastics to landfill unacceptable only 19% [4] of respondents were willing to pay more for sustainable packaging. So although they found landfilling plastic packaging unacceptable they were unwilling to pay more to solve the issue.

The aim of this research therefore was to better understand consumer view points on plastics packaging and recycling and what were they actually doing at home and why.

Following on from this what was preventing consumers from changing their behaviour and subsequently maintaining that change.

1.2 Methodology

An observational study was commissioned and undertaken by Watch Me Think. In this study citizens were asked to record their behaviour when recycling via video and then to record a second clip explaining why they did what they did; commenting on their actions and explaining their views on plastics packaging.

The aims of the study were to:-

- To understand difficulties when it comes to recycling.
- To uncover reasons why consumers don't recycle as much as they could.
- To uncover behaviours and attitudes towards recycling and how it impacts product choice.
- To discover what consumers feel could be done to improve the situation.
- To gain insight into what consumers felt about their part in the recycling process.

If citizens are to be persuaded to change their behaviour to recycle they need to be equipped with the necessary knowledge to enable them to do so. The first step in that process is to understand where and how the confusion starts, why the messaging is misunderstood, and what prevents plastics recycling from becoming maintained behaviour . [5]

The Thinkers were all asked to recycle and comment on some key items of plastic packaging:-

- Toothpaste
- Sliced bread (bag)
- Carrier bag
- Plastic drinks bottle
- Plastic bottle shampoo or conditioner or body moisturiser from the bathroom or an item from the kitchen ie bleach bottle, kitchen cleaner
- Fruit tray, black or clear
- Meat trays (chicken, fish, meat, etc) (black or clear)-
- Yogurt pot, margarine tub, ice-cream tubs
- Pouches from pet food
- Crisp packets
- Bubblewrap



2.0 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

2.1 Watch Me Think Study Respondents

Twelve Thinkers in the UK were asked to make two videos at home. The respondents covered a range of demographics, ages (19 to 63) range of incomes, geographical locations, household types as well as awareness of and engagement with environmental issues

All videos were self-filmed with no moderator present. The study was focused on following the thoughts of the respondents to ascertain the processes they went through when deciding if a package was recyclable.

2.2 Key learnings

The key findings were;

- Symbol confusion - confusion arises when the consumer identifies the Green Dot symbol or Mobius Loop as being an indicator that the pack is recyclable. If this belief conflicts with the written instructions on the pack, then they revert to previous behaviours and what they think could be right. Where there was clear and prominent OPRL labelling on the front of the pack citizens were less likely to seek out other symbols. If consumers recognised recycling advice as soon as they looked at the pack they were less likely to become confused.



- Meat contamination – Concerns over kitchen cross contamination when cleaning/rinsing meat trays is a barrier to recycling. This is less to do with whether they know if the pack is recyclable and more to do with concerns about food hygiene. This could be a contributing factor to the 15% [6] clear trays reported as not captured for recycling in the WRAP Recycling Tracking Survey 2018.



- When cleaning is required/requested, particularly in the case of food trays, citizens are unsure of what is acceptable. Some consumers clean pots, tubs and trays only in the summer months.



- Respondents were unaware of the connection between cleaning items of plastic packaging and how it relates to reducing contamination levels and consequently its value. There is no knowledge the impact contamination has on potential end markets and the value of the plastic resource to the Local Authority. Ultimately there is no connection between the cost of high contamination levels in recycling and cost of collection services.
- Where package splitting is required before an item of plastic packaging can be recycled correctly this either results in contamination (both the required and non-required items are recycled together) or consumers tend not to recycle at all. An example given here was PET drinks bottle sleeves, where the consumer either did not see the instructions to remove or when they did see it said it was too much hassle to recycle so it would then end up in the general waste.
- Recycling Capacity [7] - The practicalities of a householders recycling capacity at home compared to general waste capacity reduce the recycling of larger items such as large drinks containers, or tubs. This was the only time citizens referred to their kerbside recycling provision as having an impact on their recycling the decisions. In the cases where respondents had a box for recycling the size of plastic packaging and how much space it would take up in the box sometimes led to that packaging being placed into general waste due to bin size and capacity.

2.3 Recycling – Whose Responsibility Is It?

Citizens appeared to fall into 2 key responsibility profiles when it comes to recycling and either fitted into;

- ❖ Profile 1 – ‘The manufacturer should give me the options of products I can recycle’ Here the consumer places the responsibility firmly on the manufacturer to place all their products in packaging that can be easily and widely recycled kerbside. The view is that the responsibility of recyclability should be at the point of production by the retailer or brand involved. In this profile the opinion was that difficult to recycle packaging should not be put on the market place to begin with. This also includes a responsibility, as they see it, on the manufacturer to reduce the amount of packaging to get their product to market.
- ❖ Profile 2 – ‘The Local Authority should make it easier and let me recycle all my empty plastic packaging so that I can purchase my favourite products’. In this profile citizens see it as the responsibility of the Local Authority to ensure that they can recycle their favourite products. In this profile citizens do not need to change their buying behaviour and can place all their empty packaging for recycling without exception. This citizen saw the need for consistency in household kerbside collections as a high priority. In this profile citizens wanted the Local Authority to make it easier for them to recycle with little or minimum actions on their part.

The study reported that no consumers saw themselves as top of the responsibility chain.

Profiles 1 and 2 devolve citizens of all individual responsibility.

This also makes it difficult to change behaviour when citizens do not see the importance of their actions in the recycling process.

Current status & consumers 1st thoughts



Main barrier for recycling



What and how are they recycling?



The responsibility chain



Recommendations

3.0 PLASTICS RECYCLING THOUGHTS AND MAIN BARRIERS

The videos were analysed to ascertain;


- The first thoughts on plastics recycling
- The main barriers to recycling
- What, when and how citizens are recycling
- The responsibility chain and how they see themselves fitting within that chain

3.1 Plastic Packaging Citizens First Thoughts


The Watch Me Think Researchers concluded that the respondents were doing what they had always done. Their recycling decisions were based on an educated guess. Older consumers were generally more engaged on the subject and focused on finding solutions whereas the younger consumers in general misinterpreted information mostly formed from media headlines.

Citizens who want to recycle, and indeed do, are often mis-categorizing items but are unaware that this is the case.

The respondent whose comments are below is trying to do the right thing however these two comments come from the same video. This highlights the complex issues;



"Yes, I would recycle toothpaste due to the fact that it is small packaging."




"I have no idea of the Council guidelines or anything else"

Some respondents in the study put in their kerbside recycling products that were not accepted for recycling (such as toothpaste tubes [8] and crisp packets). They were also not recycling shampoo and conditioner bottles which could have been recycled.

Other comments included:

- "These [Crisp packets] are difficult for me because if the children are with me in front of me, and my grandchildren are eating these. They will go into my recycle box, but obviously I don't have control over them if they go outside the house with them."
- "this meat tray, it says 'No food containers' so, I'm guessing raw meat or cooked meat or anything else. Is a food container, I think so, I can't put that one in so, that has to go in the normal household rubbish?"

Whilst consumers said that they did not buy products because it was recyclable, they did claim to be buying less pre-packed fruit and vegetables to reduce the amount of plastic packaging they were purchasing. Some respondents commented that excessive plastic packaging was becoming a deterrent in purchasing decisions..

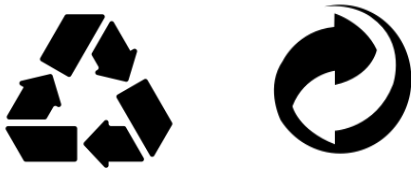


"So, things that obviously have a lot of plastic content, that seems excessive that would be a deterrent to us to continue buying them."

3.2 Symbol Confusion

All respondents were misled by the Green Dot symbol. When attempting to explain to camera why they put something into recycling would often point to that symbol as being their reasons for doing so. Sometimes this meant they got it right and other times this just added to their confusion. Whilst in the main most consumers understood crisp packets were not recyclable, they often pointed to the Green Dot symbol and said they were unsure in the light of that being printed on the pack.

Confusing symbols



*“Consumers can’t tell the difference and tend to think they mean the same thing”
(Watch Me Think study 2019)*

Figure 1: Symbol confusion

In logical terms if the consumer sees a symbol that is rotating or swish like with an arrow then they think this must indicate recyclability. From the consumer perspective the Green Dot symbol, is confused with the Mobius Loop. The two symbols are seen to be a recyclability indicator. All 12 respondents at some time referred to the Green Dot symbol as a meaning the pack was recyclable. There was also no knowledge of polymer numbers and what these indicated.

Clear consumer instructions



Colour code and written description

SLEEVE	TRAY	FILM
CARD widely recycled	PLASTIC check local recycling	PLASTIC not currently recycled

Figure 2: Clear consumer instructions

OPRL instructions of the type above, did help the consumer. If they were clear and prominent (ideally on the front of the pack), this did make the decision making process much easier and clearer.

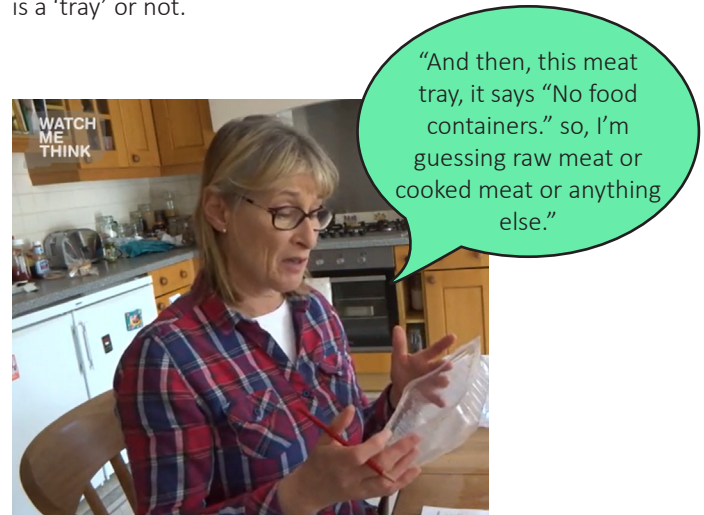
Some respondents still admitted to not checking locally and said they would not look up Local Authority instructions. Where there were instructions on the front of the pack the respondents did try to follow these. Respondents also reported that they try to follow any written instructions they had previously received by their Local Authority.

Fortunately, the Green Dot symbol which was used by the consumer to point to recyclability does often lead to the correct decision being taken even if by chance and the item gets recycled e.g. in the case of shampoo or detergent bottles. However, this misunderstanding leads to contamination in the case of crisp packets and toothpaste tubes.

3.3 Instruction Confusion

Determining what constituted a “food tray” the respondents found particularly difficult. They were unsure as to whether this meant ready meal trays, or a tray that had contained any food, cooked or uncooked. Consumer classification is crucial to the decision-making process, when it is not clear they try to second guess from the description whether their packaging matches.

Consumers were also unsure when it came to very shallow trays or packs such as cooked meat packaging, if that shallow packaging is a ‘tray’ or not.



In the main most respondents were clear about not recycling pet food pouches. The message appeared to be relatively clear on bubblewrap and all of the respondents questioned said they would not recycle. Carrier bags appeared to be reused as many times as possible before putting into general waste or taking to one of the larger supermarkets to be recycled. However, there were indications that some bags were being put into recycling when they came to the end of their ‘reuse’ life.

3.4 Cleaning

Cleaning items was highlighted as a barrier which could affect the decision to recycle. While some consumers cleaned packaging more in the summer than the winter months due to smell, others were not sure what constituted 'clean' and how far down this route they needed to go. Consequently, in the interests of not getting it wrong, they would revert to putting the item in the residual waste stream.

Washing/ rinsing off packaging

- Consumers are unsure of when it's needed and how clean it should be
- Most consumers who don't do it, say it's a nuisance. Some are afraid of contamination (especially when it comes to meat trays) in their sinks or bins (as usually the recycling bins don't have a liner).
- A number of consumers only wash items during summer, as they fear smells and items going off in their bins




Figure 3: Cleaning barriers to recycling

Chicken and other raw meat products were highlighted as a contamination concern and therefore a barrier to recycling. The fear of cross contamination in the kitchen being given as the reason for putting these items into their general waste bin. Despite packaging labelling to indicate the trays were recyclable, this type of tray was more likely to end up in residual waste, along with food trays deemed too dirty to clean. [9]



3.5 Packaging Parts

Consumers who are engaged with recycling generally will split packaging parts and deal with each element separately. Consumers less engaged, which our study showed were the younger male respondents, were the least likely to spend time splitting products down before recycling. The complications of separating component parts such as tin foil lids, would render the recycling of that package 'a hassle' and less likely to happen. What bit to put where is not an intuitive part of the process and therefore over complicates the decision.

Drinks bottles containing a sleeve were generally put in the recycling bin with the sleeve intact. There were few respondents in this study that noticed the tear off sleeve. And when it was noticed the recycling result varied inline with the individuals level of engagement. The more engaged the individual the more likely it was they were going to take the trouble to remove before recycling.




Yogurt pot

- Most would recycle, with some mixed opinions on the lid and on the foil/plastic layer (which is usually not recycled).
- Not all would clean it.



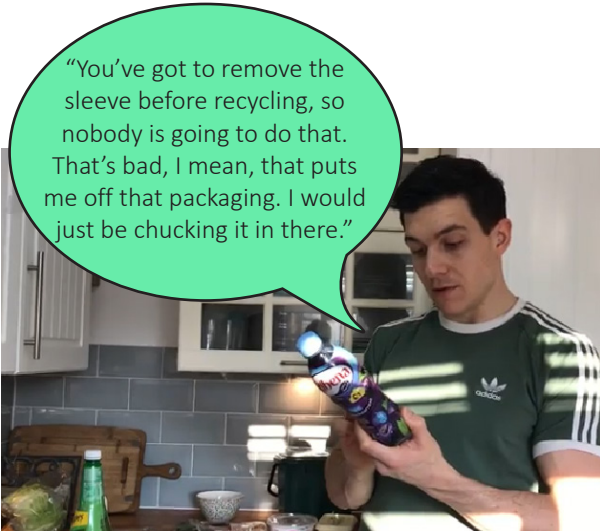
Margarine tub

- Most would recycle, but the biggest difference would be in the levels of cleaning: from none, to wiping to washing by hand or in the dishwasher.



Ice cream tub

- If it was made of plastic, there were mixed opinions whether they would recycle it or not.



In the case of kitchen cleaners and bleach bottles most would recycle the whole bottle with nozzle, trigger and pump sprays in and top on.

There was a mix of consumers who would recycle shampoo, conditioner and moisturiser bottles and those who would claimed to not recycle any of these items for a variety of reasons. Some respondents reported that they were unsure about what to do with the tops but in the main they recycled these items with the tops included.

The main reason cited for recycling these items such as cosmetic bottles was that these items displayed the Green Dot symbol.



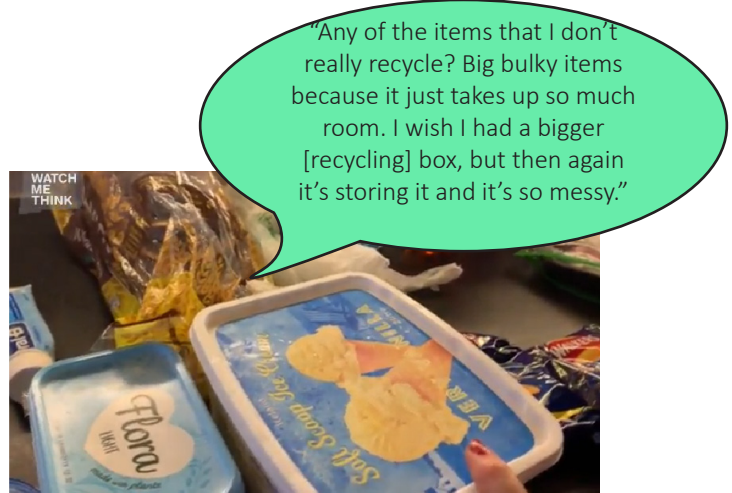
3.6 Recycling v Residual Waste Capacity

The decision of whether a pack is recycled or put into residual waste often has less to do with whether the consumer is aware of a package recyclability and more to do with the practicalities of recycling v residual waste bin sizes. In the case of larger more bulky items if consumers do not have the same capacity to recycle as to place items in general waste so they do what is easiest for them.

In the case of recycling when a householder has a recycling box which is smaller than general waste provision this may prohibit

them from recycling everything that they could.

Where the consumer may have the same size residual to recycling bin there is the risk that the consumer contaminates their recycling bin when the residual waste bin is full.



3.7 Fear of Getting it Wrong



In this study the consumer attitude was that it was ‘better to be safe than sorry’, so if in doubt then they were taking the decision not to recycle it.

Contamination levels in the MRFs,[10] show that, fear of getting it wrong, does not necessarily equate to the consumer getting it right. This suggests that their previous confusion over symbols, cleaning, and package splitting is a contributory source of contamination. [11]

This can also be compounded by what the consumer sees as conflicting advice when they know their local instructions are different from friends and family or when some items of packaging have been the subject of media headlines.

4.0 CONCLUSIONS

Consumer confusion is complex and is not based upon a clear set of decision-making rules.

It is clouded by;

1. What the packaging says against what the Local Authorities say.
2. Unclear collection service guidelines with one word descriptions of what is or is not target material.
3. Communications on the pack vary and appear to be conflicting and unclear
4. Varying collection services across the UK so no one uniform message.



Figure 4: Plastics Recycling – Confusion Contributors

4.1 The Responsibility Chain

Citizens appeared to fall into 2 key profiles when it comes to recycling and where their responsibilities fit;

The responsibility chain profile 1 – here consumers place the onus on the manufacturer first. These consumers were generally happy with the service level kerbside from the Local Authority but were keen to see the manufacturer make the recycling advice more prominent on the packaging, to reduce the amount of plastic packaging they put onto the market, as well as making sure all packaging is fully recyclable.

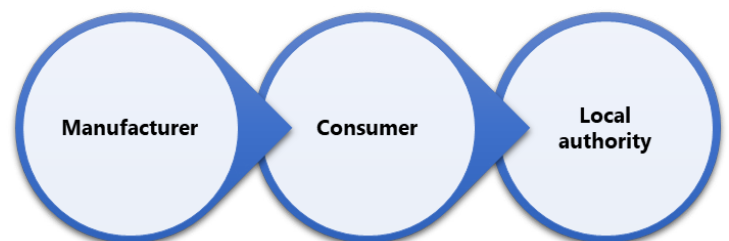


Figure 5: Profile 1 responsibility chain

The responsibility chain profile 2 – Here the consumer believes the Local Authority should make recycling easier and more consistent. They wanted to continue to purchase their favourite products, commenting that it was up to the Local Authority to make recycling easier.

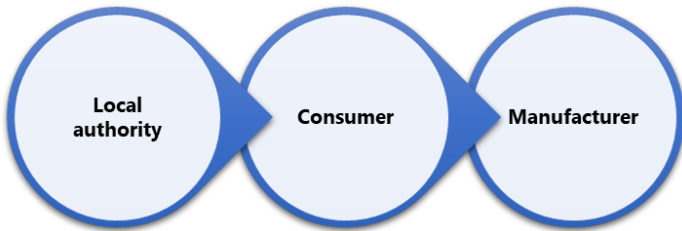


Figure 6: Profile 2 responsibility chain



In neither of these profiles did the consumer see themselves as top of the responsibility chain. When it came to responsibility for plastic packaging recycling the responsibility lay with either the manufacturer or the Local Authority. Unfortunately, this also meant that the citizens themselves were devolved of direct responsibility.

The study indicated that consumers decisions on whether an item is recyclable or not is based on an educated guess and then they 'hope they get it right'. Attitudes and engagement varies with age, and gender, as well as geographical location and social demographic.

Citizens are looking to either the manufacturers or their Local Authority to solve the issue and ensure that packaging available in the High Street all either fully recyclable or reusable and that their local authority provides the facilities for them to do so.

4.2 Consumer choice and Packaging Variants

The consumer needs to be able to know at a glance whether the item is recyclable or not regardless of brand and content. They want the recycling message to be easily recognisable, loud and clear. (OPRL guidelines in a prominent position ideally on the front of packs can achieve this.) Marketers strive to make their product different, stand out from the crowd to invite consumer purchase, but this does not make the consumer recycling decision easy. All these differences in type, shape, and colour of packaging makes it difficult to deliver clear uniform recycling messages.

The challenge is how to make the packaging fit both marketers demands, product functionality, consumer need but at the same time easy to distinguish whether it is recyclable. Putting recycling messages loud and clear on the front of packaging does assist the consumer in their recycling decisions but can conflict with the brand marketers desire to make their pack unique and appealing to prospective customers. [12]

4.3 Media headlines and myths

Media headlines can mislead consumers and are often contradictory to Local Authority instructions. [12]

Sweeping statements either in newspaper or TV headlines can result in citizens either not engaging with the message at all, or completely misinterpreting previous instructions.

For example - The Independent - 21st September 2018 - **"Everything you've been told about plastic is wrong - the answer isn't recycling."**



5.0 RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Support from Manufacturers

There is a need for manufacturers to simplify recyclability through use of recyclable plastic packaging choices. Work to improve recyclability of plastic packaging via design is crucial.

Clear information on packaging and making that information more prominent and easier to read was requested by the respondents in this study. As one consumer in the study put it ***“if it is to be the next big thing, we need to be mindful of then it needs to be in big black type, ‘please recycle me’.”***

The consumer is asking for a simplified “Recycle” “Do Not Recycle” messaging not messaging that requires them to do further research. (OPRL 'Widely Recycled' messaging achieves this.)

Ideally, the consumers would prefer that all elements of that pack are recycled not just certain parts. Minimising the actions that they need to carry out at point of disposal minimises the risk of non-compliance.

What consumers are clearly saying here is that, if recycling is that important, and if you as a manufacturer/brand owner want me to recycle a particular product, make it easy for me.

5.2 Confusing Symbols

Consistency and simplification of symbols on the packaging is needed.

The fact that there are a number of symbols which look similar but do not mean the same is misleading. Individuals are unable to distinguish one symbol from another. If the symbol looks like a swish and has some kind of arrow, then consumers presume that this is an indication of recyclability.

It is clear that the consumer will not look for additional information unless very dedicated to recycling. They are unlikely to trawl their Local Authority web sites etc for further instructions. Proactive information and communications campaigns are needed to direct the consumer to understand what these different symbols mean.

In the absence of any clear communications explaining these

symbols and what they mean/indicate consumers will continue to be confused.

Again, it should be noted that when OPRL Widely Recycled labelling prominent this reduced confusion and the consumer was less likely to be mis-led by the Green Dot symbol or Mobius Loop.

5.3 Local Authority Information

Support from Local Authorities to the householders in terms of clear and accessible information is crucial to minimising confusion.

Whilst consistency across the country in terms of materials collected is clearly needed citizens still need to understand what the Local Authority are asking for and why. Simple clear unambiguous instructions (preferably with examples) not just wording will assist citizens in their decision-making process.

Clear instructions for cleaning, tops on or off, trigger and pump sprays in or out, what constitutes a food tray are needed. As well as pictures alongside those descriptions to reduce the possibility of misunderstanding.

Communications should be regular to reinforce the message. This will assist learnt behaviour that will ultimately become habit. If citizens are to change their behaviour and effectively recycle more, they need to be fully equipped with the knowledge and understanding to facilitate that behaviour change. Citizens need to be engaged with regularly and encouraged to continue their efforts if that change is to be maintained. Confusion prevents that behaviour from becoming self-efficacy.

RECOUP will continue to utilise the insights gained from this work in future Pledge2Recycle Plastics communications and education available for packs or Local Authority download.

5.4 Need to Dispel Myths

The preparation of packaging before recycling brings issues in terms of hygiene. In the case of meat trays, citizens were likely not to recycle it due to concerns over cross contamination in the kitchen. Education and guidance on this aspect could prevent this material stream from being lost.

An improved understanding of how plastics are recycled and used once its collected could improve recycling rates. Citizens are not always convinced that the material actually ends up being recycled and more importantly what is recycled within the UK or Europe and what it is recycled into. There is almost no understanding of bottle to bottle recycling.

Education is also needed to encourage citizens to do more in terms of ensuring that they do not contaminate either through recycling items that are not target material kerbside or unclean items. Citizens are blissfully unaware of the unintended consequences of contamination and the costs to the Local Authority and ultimately the impact on their rates.

Communications to householders as to other options in terms of recycling other than via their Local Authority kerbside collection is needed as well as information and data to households on the cost and implications of kerbside contamination.

It should be common knowledge that;

1. PET drinks bottles can and are recycled in the UK.



2. Plastics have advantages over other materials in terms of light weighting and therefore CO2 saving.



3. Plastics can have a range of benefits in terms of food safety and reduction of food wastage.



4. If householders contaminate their recycling bin it does cost their Local Authority.



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9. Could be a contributing factor for the high level of clear trays (15%) reported to not be captured for recycling in the WRAP Recycling Tracking Survey 2018, Behaviours, attitudes and awareness around recycling, available at <http://www.wrap.org.uk/content/recycling-tracker-report-0>
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RESEARCH STUDY INTO CONSUMER PLASTIC RECYCLING BEHAVIOUR

2019



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