

The Guardian makes potato starch news!

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Walkers decision to recycle its crisp bags, and Morrison's to offer shoppers paper rather than plastic carrier bags, have also made news headlines. The Government wants its new Resources and Waste Strategy to make all businesses more sustainable. But it wants to hear your views first.

Adding your two-pennyworth to major national changes

When a national newspaper wraps its weekend supplements in a compostable potato starch material meant for the compost heap, or food waste bin, rather than landfill site, it is almost guaranteed news column inches.

So too is a leading food manufacturer's decision to tackle the complex problem of recycling multi-material crisp bags with a "difficult but not impossible to treat" metallised content, albeit after considerable public pressure.

On yet another potato theme, this time at the perishable end of the retail sector, Morrisons is running a trial to replace single-use plastic shopping bags in its stores with a recyclable paper option.

All change

The underlying message for ordinary manufacturing, trading and service companies is that any incremental improvements they can make for better waste management are not "small-potatoes".

In fact, the opposite is true. SMEs are in pole position when it comes to helping their customers, supply chains – and the whole UK waste industry which now faces tumultuous change.

As an added bonus, more sustainable waste management also puts you in the virtuous league alongside a growing list of major brands – M&S, Sainsbury's, Ben & Jerry, McDonalds, plus Unilever, Philips, Ikea, Samsung and many more. Not all solutions involve potatoes!

However, there is another good reason for acting sooner rather than later. The Government's Resources and Waste Strategy for England (https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/765914/resources-waste-strategy-dec-2018.pdf) will make minimising waste and maximising resource efficiency compulsory through a series of carefully-detailed key milestones leading up to 2050. By the mid-century point, all avoidable waste – and plastic waste – must be eliminated.

A 2019 priority will be setting up regular household collections to tackle food waste. There will also be a strong emphasis on taking plastics out of the environment as microbeads ingested by marine life enter the human food chain.

Waste of crime

In parallel, there will be a huge push to end waste crime – which many firms don't realise they are committing. Tougher regulations on the transport, management and description of waste will be backed by intelligence sharing to end criminal activity, including the misuse of waste exemptions.

There will also be digital waste movement tracking, a Joint Unit for Waste Crime, much tougher criminal penalties, plus a lot of publicity work. In 2018, the Environment Agency closed more than 800 illegal sites and achieved 93 successful prosecutions – beware the EA in 2019!

A brand-new resource (formerly known as waste)

When Dame Ellen MacArthur sailed around the world in a small boat, she noted that: "What you have is all you have". On the crowded boat called Planet Earth, the Ellen MacArthur Foundation, Government and Low Carbon Programme see the Circular Economy as the best sustainable solution.

Rather than throw old, damaged bodies away, nature reuses them as nutrient for future generations in an endless cycle. We need to do the same. Waste isn't a problem; losing or mis-using it is.

The Chamber's Circular Economy Club starts in April to demonstrate and share examples of good practice and collaboration. Despite recent snow and ice, April isn't far off. Please book a free place as soon as possible (<https://www.chamberlowcarbon.co.uk/contact/>).

Making your voice heard

Before looking at Defra's strategy blueprint (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/resources-and-waste-strategy-for-england/resources-and-waste-strategy-at-a-glance>), two key points stand out.

The first is that when officials talk about extensive consultations, they want to understand the experiences, hopes and worries of ordinary companies before finalising details.

This is a real opportunity to influence the eventual outcome. The Chamber of Commerce monitors consultations routinely. If you would like to join a consultation but would like guidance, please contact our Low Carbon team in the first instance.

The other point is that if we look at some of the interim routes currently being used to deal with waste, it becomes clear that a huge innovative change is needed if the UK is going to meet its wider global and environmental goals. This is genuinely unexplored territory.

As an example, a significant tonnage of the UK's waste is currently shipped to Denmark, Germany and Sweden as district heating system fuel. Incineration itself is unsustainable. But potential post-Brexit border friction emphasises the urgent need for a fundamental review of how we deal with our waste.

Resources and Waste Strategy

The strategy – supported by additional legislation if necessary – is designed to end dependency on landfill sites that produce greenhouse gases, improve poor air quality, clean up rivers and stop single-use plastics entering the oceans.

On a high level, it aims to “preserve our stock of material resources by minimising waste” by turning an “inefficient ‘linear’ economic model of “take, make, use, throw” into a circular economy that keeps “resources in use for as long as possible to extract the maximum value” and “give old materials a new lease of life”.

The pathway for a national UK circular economy was outlined last year in the Government's 25 Year Environment Plan (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/25-year-environment-plan>).

Strategy specifics

One of the strategy's main goals is to make commercial companies fully responsible for the full costs of waste recycling and disposal under the “polluter pays” principle. There will also be a new tax on any plastic packaging that has includes less than a 30% content of recycled plastics. Deposit-return schemes will also be introduced for bottles, cans and plastic containers.

For the first time ever, businesses will also have a binding target to recycle 65% of any waste created by their goods and services. This is in addition to glass and timber recycling.

Minimum eco-design requirements will also be set to encourage more resource-efficient products. A Chemicals Strategy will help to break down barriers that stop chemicals being reused and recycled sustainably.

Does this seem unfair? Government evidence suggests that some 80% of the environmental damage caused when products become waste can be avoided by better design and manufacture. That puts companies firmly in the driving seat.

The new model also wants knowledge to be shared through “resource efficiency clusters”. This will be another Low Carbon Programme priority, whether clusters are regional or specialist-sector based.

Consumer help

People also need more help with their buying decisions. Ipsos MORI research finds that a majority of consumers want businesses to help them reduce their waste. Circa 80% preferred money-back incentives, plus spaces in shops for returning used packaging and clothing. Loyalty points are popular. There is also a trend towards “hiring not buying”.

The average life span of many products is lower now than 20 years ago. Repair, reuse and remanufacturing are three tools that will be used to reverse this trend. Consumers will be given more product information. Certain plastics will be banned when a good alternative is available.

Helping householders and councils

In addition to new food waste collections, households and municipal waste collection authorities must also raise their recycling rates. Household recycling levels in England have risen by circa 11% since 2000/1, but plateaued since 2013.

The Government wants to improve all dry recyclable material waste collection services, raise Energy from Waste (EfW) plant efficiency, publish more information on using secondary materials and strengthen the waste hierarchy where hazardous waste is involved.

How will this be funded?

Industry will pay through Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR). How will this work? Firms will face higher fees if their products are harder to reuse, repair or recycle – cars, electrical goods, batteries, textiles, fishing gear, tyres, construction & demolition materials, mattresses, furniture and carpets.

Defra estimates that EPR from packaging will generate an annual revenue stream of between £500 million and £1 billion which will help fund recycling and disposal.

Common-sense

If all this sounds onerous, there are sound reasons for jumping before being pushed.

When change is inevitable, moving ahead of the curve with innovative products and solutions that the new market needs can give you an edge. Particularly if financial incentives are available. Resisting change until the bitter end could mean short-term gains but long-term losses.

There is also moral and reputational value in helping to solve bad environmental problems.

Food, zips and light bulbs

Firms are creating solutions at different levels in different ways.

Unilever, Procter & Gamble (P&G) and PepsiCo are among the 24 corporate co-founders of a new 'waste-free' retail platform called Loop which businesses can use to give their customers branded product refills while keeping ownership of their own reusable packaging.

As an international design and manufacturing example, Samsung is phasing out all virgin plastic components from its consumer-facing packaging during the first half of 2019. Phone, tablet and smartwatch packaging trays will now be made from pulp-based alternatives.

On a different track, Dutch multinational technology company, Philips, is taking the "hire rather than buy" idea to modern long-life light bulbs. Now Ikea is to let customers lease rather than buy furniture in an environmentally-friendly project. The Swedish company's CEO explained that when pieces of furniture are handed back at the end of a lease, "... instead of throwing those away, we refurbish them a little and we could sell them, prolonging the lifecycle of the product".

Meanwhile, as a practical example of a small but significant service change that people value, the Californian outdoor clothing company, Patagonia, now offers to repair its customers' damaged zips.

The Guardian, Walkers and Morrisons

Interestingly, all three companies have made deliberate decisions to accept higher waste management costs for sustainable reasons that an increasing number of customers and the public value.

The Guardian ditched polythene covers in favour of compostable packaging after listening to its readers' feedback. Walkers says its packets are technically recyclable and the issue has been that they were not separated or collected for recycling.

Morrisons' reusable paper bag will cost 20p. The firm will also trial raising the cost of its reusable plastic carrier bag from 10p to 15p to further cut down on single-use plastics. Plastic bag demand has already fallen by more than 85% since charges were first introduced, it says.

Every little helps!

