

Biffa report reveals nearly 1 million tonnes of plastic packaging waste could be avoided by 2029 through material standardisation

2 years ago



Nearly 1 million (0.8m) tonnes of plastic packaging waste could be avoided by standardising materials within the next five years, according to a new report from [sustainable waste management company Biffa](#).

The report – [The UK Journey to Circularity](#) – launched alongside Biffa’s Waste Net Zero conference at the Birmingham Hippodrome on 11 June.

Working with [consultancy partner WSP](#), the experts at Biffa have developed a new approach to circularity research and analysis, creating a framework which can be applied to specific resource streams, but also scaled to whole sectors or individual products. It outlines nine interventions to reduce plastic packaging waste – with timescales – needed from businesses, consumers and the UK Government.

The largest opportunity for intervention in the plastic [packaging waste](#) stream comes with the standardisation of materials; as a result, up to 0.8 million tonnes of material can be effectively recycled, rather than wasted. For significant impact to be seen in the quantity of plastic packaging effectively recycled, businesses will need to consider options for reuse and end-of-life processing in product design.

Biffa has already been part of a big change made in standardisation, advocating as part of a wider group of sustainable organisations for the standardisation of milk bottle caps. Historically, caps were coloured based on the milk a bottle contained (e.g. green for semi-skimmed) but have since been replaced with a

clear alternative.

In turn, colour contamination in the HDPE (high-density polyethylene) material waste stream is reduced and – ultimately – bottles and caps can be recycled together to become new, food-grade [plastic](#) products in a [circular economy](#).

Some onus regarding the interventions lies on the Government too, to implement extensions of existing legislation. The [Plastic Packaging Tax](#) (PPT) alone – a live scheme that over half (54%) of UK businesses recently told Biffa would impact them and ranked as the most important in a Censuswide survey commissioned by the brand* – could lead to a further increase in the recycled content of plastic packaging by up to 0.3 million tonnes.

The waste and recycling industry has called for a higher target for the amount of recycled content mandated in the PPT, up to 50% and progressive taxation up to £500 per tonne. However, an extension of this tax to facilitate a 75% target for recycled content, rather than the current [estimation of around 40%](#) (which is already the equivalent of nearly 200,000 tonnes in carbon savings in 2022 and 2023), could see the potential impact of the legislation rise to from 0.3 to between 0.5 and 0.75 million tonnes by 2029.

Further interventions, such as a shift towards reusable packaging, implementation of ‘consumer pays’ schemes and enabling non-mechanical recycling could each see 0.13, 0.35 and 0.35 million tonnes of plastic packaging waste recycled where it may not have been otherwise.

Head of Partnerships, Biffa, Carla Brian, [summarises what needs to be true to achieve these high-volume reductions](#):

“Requirements for new infrastructure are necessary but hinge on when, and to what extent, changes in the supply chain are made. Efforts to make plastic packaging more circular could simplify (with standardisation, for example) or lessen the burden on existing waste management infrastructure.

“Upcoming legislation – including Simpler Recycling – will be a starting point for circular activity; expansions of (and new) legislation will further circular growth. Some policies have overlapping goals, too. If implemented correctly, for example, the [Deposit Return Scheme](#) will achieve similar goals to [Extended Producer Responsibility](#).

“The value of circularity is not fully recognised, so education is needed for businesses and consumers. Programmes highlighting environmental, financial and societal benefits of circularity could lead to behavioural change, while reactionary businesses will make change more rapidly with consumer desire for circular products and services.

“Investment in areas outside of infrastructure (though the two are closely linked). For example, in research, development and demonstration will help identify and test circular best practice. Such investments will assist in the transition to more circular ways of working.”

Full details of Biffa’s framework for UK circularity, including the interventions, the timelines associated and the potential impact in plastic packaging can be found in *The UK Journey to Circularity* report: <https://www.biffa.co.uk/campaigns/waste-net-zero-2024>

*A Censuswide survey of 1,001 UK business decision makers with authority on sustainability or



environmental issues in April 2024