

RECOUP UK HOUSEHOLD PLASTICS COLLECTION SURVEY POINTS TO MATERIAL QUALITY CHALLENGE

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RECOUP has issued its UK Household Plastics Collection Survey, a specialist, research-based report for those working in or making decisions about household plastics waste and the recycled plastics value chain.

There are wholesale changes that will directly affect the UK's waste and recycling industry, and these not only need to drive up collection rates but tackle the quality of material collected for recycling.

Looking at collection quantities, the 2019 survey estimates that nearly 550,000 tonnes of plastic were collected for recycling in 2018 from UK households. This included 371,000 tonnes of plastic bottles,

157,000 tonnes of plastic pots, tubs and trays, and 21,000 tonnes of plastic film. This is over a 4% increase from the previous year. However, there are new, complex data considerations around the 2019 report:

- New estimated plastic packaging Placed on the Market (POM) data;
- A better understanding of the composition of data reported as 'mixed plastics'; and,
- Estimating plastic film collections for the first time.

In particular, analysis of the composition of 'mixed plastics' has adjusted the collection data and rates from the 2018 survey, and it should be noted these do not represent real-life changes, but a granular and more precise estimate of the collection data.

Building in these new data considerations, the collection rate for plastic bottles is 59%, plastic pots, tubs and trays 31%, and plastic film 5%.

Careful Balance Needed to Meet Long-Term Goals

Although this points to the most significant increase in estimated plastics packaging collections for five years, it is not growing quickly or cleanly enough to meet future Circular Economy ambitions.

Local Authorities reported contamination of material as the single biggest challenge they face in delivering effective collection services, followed by budget cuts for providing waste and recycling collections and communications. Although collection quantities are increasing, contamination levels are too, and this puts a strain on Local Authorities and waste management providers.

Looking at the challenge in more depth, 51% of Local Authorities are reporting they received budget cuts for providing waste and recycling collections. Focussing on litter, 38% reported “widespread distribution of litter” including 10% “heavily affected by litter”. This not only directly risks delivering effective services, but also widens the gap from the current situation to achieving a relatively litter-free society.

The RECOUP UK Household Plastics Collection Survey provides a comprehensive review of the collection of household plastics for recycling, but also reports on the multi-faceted variables that will, or might, come into effect. There are more variables now than ever before, including the political and regulatory environment around plastics and plastic recycling; use of a Deposit Return Scheme; the potential use of chemical recycling; and the impact litter, waste, and disposal ‘On the Go’ has on Local Authorities and their communities.

Looking into 2020, the UK now has a once-in-a-generation opportunity to tackle both the collection challenges. Steve Morgan, Policy & Infrastructure Manager at RECOUP, commented:

“With the UK looking to transform the future governance, structure and funding of how the UK manages packaging waste and meet commitments, although financial investment should increase it needs to be focussed in the right areas. The order in which legislation is introduced is important to their long-term success, and a careful balance will be needed between doing this quickly to meet immediate needs and optimising the systems to meet the UK’s long-term goals.”

The 2019 RECOUP UK Household Plastics Collection Survey report is available to download for FREE for RECOUP members. The report will be available for non-members shortly, either through becoming a RECOUP member or for purchase for £499 + VAT. Visit RECOUP's website (<http://www.recoup.org/p/324/uk-household-plastics-collection-survey-2019>) for more information.

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