

12 January 2018

## **The Impact of China's Recycling Import Restrictions on Somerset**

### **Summary**

- **China, a key international market for recycling, has slashed the amount of material it will accept for reprocessing**
- **Materials affected are primarily paper, card and plastic – and some other authorities have not been able to recycle/sell what they have collected**
- **Somerset's kerbside sort system and focus on waste as a valuable resource enables us to still recycle almost everything in the UK, so we are largely unaffected by China's changes**
- **Through Recycle More we are committed to collecting even more types of plastics, but it will take concerted action from us, consumers, producers, the waste industry and national government to address the particular challenges we face with recycling mixed plastics**
- **National Government's 25 year Environment Plan reflects the ambition and scale of change needed, but further detail is needed (see appendix 1)**

### **Introduction**

There has been much media coverage relating to recent changes in China's policy, restricting import of certain types of materials for recycling. China, with her significant manufacturing industry and high growth economy, has been a major destination for some UK recycling streams – in particular paper, card and plastic. At the same time, the impact of plastic on the natural environment has become a cause of significant public concern lately (the Blue Planet effect). This is reflected in the prominence given to tackling plastic waste in national Government's 25 Year Environment Plan.

This brief outlines the potential impact on Somerset, how we are successfully weathering the storm and what the future is likely to hold. The key messages are:

- Because of the effort that Somerset residents put into sorting their waste at the kerbside, we produce high quality materials that are still in demand
- SWP's approach means we use waste effectively as a resource, nearly all of which stays in the UK
- Until we implement Recycle More the only plastic we can accept at the kerbside is plastic bottles – the challenges that other authorities are currently facing in dealing with their mixed plastics shows the challenges we need to work through to maintain Somerset's focus on resource efficiency
- Whilst recycling is a key part of the solution, it cannot address the problems of plastic waste on its own. Everyone must play a daily part in reducing waste, and further action from producers, the waste industry and national government is needed

## What is China doing?

China has long been a destination for recycling packaging material from the UK and elsewhere. This export feeds demand for their manufacturing industry and takes advantage of space on container ships that would otherwise return largely empty. The Chinese government are now tightening up regulations in a wide ranging initiative to improve their environmental performance; including tackling the dumping of poorly sorted and highly contaminated materials, sometimes illegally, in China.



The policy change is manifesting itself in a number of ways, including far stricter rules about acceptance of low quality cardboard, mixed plastic and mixed paper (that is different types of paper, such as phone books, junk mail and other paper mixed together). These are now, effectively, no longer allowed, while any recycling that is imported can only have a contamination level of less than half of one percent.

## What is the impact on recyclable materials in the UK?

This will have a significant impact on those who collect unsorted materials liable to contamination, and in particular mixed plastics. The global price for PTT (Plastic Pots, tubs and trays) dropped significantly in response. This is a particular challenge for those that collect mixed recyclables (unlike Somerset's kerbside sort system), and more fundamentally, the over reliance on recycling as the only solution to environmental issues created by the manufacture and consumption of materials, particularly where producers don't face the full costs that their materials create.

## How does this affect Somerset now?



In addition to the environmental benefits of recycling, waste is a resource. Somerset's kerbside sort system recognises that our waste resources have to compete with virgin materials, and to compete effectively we need to ensure they are good quality and cost effective, and we need markets with a demand for these materials.

Somerset practices put us in a uniquely strong position to limit the impact of these changes. Last year 94% of materials collected in the county were recycled in the UK, with all food waste and garden waste reprocessed here in Somerset, and only a small proportion going overseas. Of the material that does get exported, our kerbside sort collection system means we gather high quality, well sorted, low contaminated material, so it is a useful

resource still in demand. Kier (our current collection contractor) bears all risk related to the price achieved selling the material collected from Somerset households.

## How does it impact on the plastic Somerset collects?

Whilst the impact of China's policy changes go much further than mixed plastics, Somerset is also relatively insulated from these changes because the only type of plastic we currently collect at the kerbside is plastic bottles. All Household Waste Recycling Centres also collect plastic bottles, nearly all<sup>1</sup> collect Tetrapak-style food and drink containers and single use coffee cups, and two (Priorswood and Poole) collect plastic pots, tubs and trays. **In the current financial year (April – November 2017) only 0.02% of the plastic we collected (i.e. one in every five thousand plastic bottles) were sent abroad, none of it to China.** This means that: -

- What we collect for recycling gets recycled in a resource efficient way
- There are no stockpiles of Somerset materials
- Our waste is a resource for local and domestic industry
- Our annual [End Use Register](#) shows what happens to everything we collect

## What is SWP doing in the future about plastic and the changing market?

In line with Somerset Waste Board's vision, our focus remains on the environmental impact we have and on using waste as an effective resource (in addition to delivering excellent value for money). Our future plans include:

- When we roll out **Recycle More** we will collect plastics pots, tubs and trays, tetrapak style food and drink cartons and other additional materials at the kerbside. A key part of our work ahead of that will be to ensure that we have sustainable routes to market for these additional materials. National Government's new **25 year Environment Plan** (see Appendix 1) recognises that a rounded approach involving consumers, producers, the waste and recycling industry and national policy levers are needed.
- We need to do more to **communicate to the public in Somerset** about what happens to their waste, the benefits of kerbside sort and to capitalise on the 'blue planet' effect to encourage people to make more sustainable choices. SWP will shortly launch a media campaign, focussed primarily on plastic (capitalising on the Blue Planet effect), to share the good news around Somerset's environmental impact (including relaunching our End Use Register) and encouraging people to find alternatives to single use packaging. This will form part of our over-arching communications strategy in preparation for Recycle More, other elements of which include creating a high-profile launch of the new schools education programme, taking these key messages to the next generation, and seeking to work in partnership to help local food and drink businesses improve their consumer packaging.

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<sup>1</sup> Our smallest sites (Dimmer, Cheddar, Dulverton and Somerton) do not have space to collect tetrapak-style food and drink cartons

## Appendix 1: Summary of National Government's 25 Year Environment Plan

Theme	Ambition	Action/area of work
<b>Targets</b>	<b>Zero avoidable waste</b> by 2050	New <b>Resources and Waste Strategy</b> to be published in 2018 will set out UK's approach to reducing waste, promoting markets for secondary materials, incentivising producers to design better products and how we can manage materials at the end of life by targeting environmental impacts. Recognises need to stop producing so much waste, more efficient production processes, better designed products that reduce waste and use recycled/reused materials wherever possible, and that we must ensure that we are not simply exporting waste to other countries
	<b>Eliminate avoidable plastic waste</b> by 2042	
	Meet current targets & develop <b>ambitious new targets</b> and milestones	
	Work towards no <b>food waste</b> entering landfill by 2030	
<b>Plastics product lifecycle</b>	<b>Production stage:</b> encourage producers to take responsibility for the environmental impacts of their products and rationalise the number of different types of plastic	Working with industry
		Reforming and possibly extending producer responsibility systems
		Exploring whether other problematic materials with suitable alternatives should be banned, like microbeads have been
		Seeking to accelerate innovation of more sustainable materials
	<b>Consumption stage:</b> reduce the amount of plastic in circulation through reducing demand for single-use plastics	Removing all single use plastics from central gov't estate
		Extending the successful 5p plastic bag charge to small retailers
		Seeking to significantly extend refill points to top up water bottles
		Working with retailers to introduce plastic free supermarket aisles
	<b>End of use stage:</b> making it easier for people to recycle by	Continuing to support industry led on-pack recycling labelling system and encouraging take up
		Implementing voluntary & regulatory interventions to cut the amount of litter and improve recycling and packaging reuse
	<b>End of use stage:</b> Improve the rate of recycling	Working with the waste management industry and reprocessors to significantly increase the proportion of plastic packaging that is collected and recycled
		Develop a standard for biodegradable plastic bags
Develop a new cross-sector commitment to tackle plastic waste (applying circular economy principles), starting with packaging		
<b>Residual Waste</b>	Improving management of residual waste (particularly <b>Energy from Waste</b> )	Explore different options for managing residual waste beyond electricity (including the production of biofuels for transport)
		Increase the use of heat produced at waste facilities through better connection to heat networks
		Investigate ways to cut carbon dioxide emissions from EfW facilities by managing the amount of plastics in residual waste
<b>Collections</b>	Committed to supporting <b>comprehensive and frequent waste and recycling collections</b> which protect local amenity & ensure that products are recycled as much as possible, returning high quality materials back to the economy	Accelerate the shift to consistency in materials collected through the WRAP Framework for greater consistency working with industry and local authorities to ensure that a consistent set of materials are collected by all local authorities (especially plastics)
<b>Litter</b>	Continue to implement the Government's <b>Litter Strategy</b> for England (note that this is not SWP responsibility, but is of relevance)	<i>Introducing new regulations to improve local authorities' enforcement powers, supported by new guidance on its proportionate use.</i>
		<i>Developing a national antilittering campaign, led by the government and funded by the private sector</i>
		<i>Distributing a £450,000 litter Innovation Fund to pilot, implement and evaluate small scale local research projects that could be replicated more widely</i>