

Write-up: Unpacking the circular economy: reuse and refill in packaging solutions

17th March 2022

Roundtable hosted by Policy Connect, the All-Party Sustainable Resource Group (APSRG) and Brunel University London.

Topic: the role of reusable and refillable packaging solutions, to move the UK to a circular economy.

Participants: parliamentarians, decision-makers, as well as representatives from industry, academia and the third sector.

Policy Connect produced this document as a post-event write-up with contribution from Brunel University London. While it was informed by the roundtable discussion, it does not necessarily represent the view of all those in attendance or Policy Connect.

The event and the write-up was kindly sponsored by the Public Engagement Fund of Brunel University London.

Key takeaways

- There remains ambiguity around the term we use for reusable/refillable packaging. Further work is needed to ensure more consistent terminology.
- Whole-systems analysis is required integrating social, economic and environmental considerations to minimise any undesired outcomes.
- Design can help to bring together different disciplines required to develop new solutions.
- Further work is needed on consumer engagement to understand consumer preferences and design inclusive solutions.
- Labelling has an important role to engage consumers in reuse and refill packaging initiatives.
- Further work is needed to understand and address hygiene concerns.
- Reuse and refill systems have to be designed in an inclusive and accessible way for everyone.

Definitions of reusable and refillable packaging

- The EU directive definition states that reusable packaging is packaging which has been conceived, designed and marketed to carry out multiple trips in its lifetime by being refilled or reused for the same purpose for which it was conceived.
- The UK definition goes further, stating that once packaging has been reused, it must meet the requirements for recycling, energy recovery or composting.
- Reusable packaging should be designed from materials that are recyclable at the end of their life.
- There remains ambiguity around the term we use for reusable/refillable packaging. There is a need for more consistent terminology. Brunel University London suggests reusable packaging as the umbrella term for refillable packaging and returnable packaging.

- The Ellen MacArthur Foundation (2019) proposed four key models for reusable and refillable packaging: refill at home and refill on-the-go, alongside return from home and return on-the-go¹. This model distinguishes between packaging types based on the ownership of packaging. This can be either business-owned (businesses are responsible for cleaning and refilling packaging) or consumer-owned (the citizen is responsible for use and wash of their own packaging). Many actors working on reuse and refill use the Ellen MacArthur Foundation definition.
- Long et al. (2021) has identified 15 archetypes of reusable packaging².
- Reuse is often defined as the operation by which packaging is refilled or used for the same purpose for which it was conceived. But researchers found that when talking to consumers about reusable and refillable packaging, people often start talking about 'repurpose' – referring to single use packaging that is given a secondary purpose. This has to be considered when conducting consumer-facing research.
- Definitions matter for metrics as well which are used to track progress. Metrics for measuring reuse are challenging, especially when consumers bring their own packaging for reuse.

¹ Ellen MacArthur Foundation. 2019. Reuse – Rethinking Packaging: <https://emf.thirdlight.com/link/rzv910prtxn-tfiulo/@/preview/2>

² Long et. al. 2019. Product–Service Systems Applied to Reusable Packaging Systems: A Strategic Design Tool <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/dmj.12057>

About Policy Connect

Policy Connect is a cross-party think tank. We specialise in supporting parliamentary groups, forums and commissions, delivering impactful policy research and event programmes and bringing together parliamentarians and government in collaboration with academia, business and civil society to help shape public policy in Westminster and Whitehall, so as to improve people's lives.

Our work focusses on five key policy areas which are: Education & Skills; Industry, Technology & Innovation; Sustainability; Health; and Assistive & Accessible Technology.

We are a social enterprise and are funded by a combination of regular annual membership subscriptions and time-limited sponsorships. We are proud to be a Disability Confident and London Living Wage employer, and a member of Social Enterprise UK.

About the APSRG

Established in 1995, the All-Party Parliamentary Sustainable Resource Group (APSRG) is the leading forum informing the debate between parliamentarians, business leaders and the sustainable resource community.

The APSRG's mission is to provide an objective platform for effective communication between policymakers, businesses and organisations with an interest in the sustainable resource management agenda and to raise awareness of sustainable resource issues within Parliament.

The APSRG organises a regular programme of focused parliamentary events, conducts detailed policy research projects and provides in-depth parliamentary monitoring and analysis to its associate member organisations and parliamentarians.

Through all its activities, it provides an invaluable platform for engagement in this vital field at a time when the sustainability agenda is of pressing importance; facilitating relationship building and generating a forward-thinking policy debate.

About Sustainable PLasticS research (SPLASH), Brunel University

The Sustainable PLasticS research (SPLaSH) group at Brunel University London combines the strengths of social scientists and colleagues working in the area of plastic pollution from Environmental Sciences (Dr Eleni Iacovidou, Prof Susan Jobling), Global Challenges (Dr Olwenn Martin), Design and Engineering (Dr Fabrizio Ceschin, Dr Lucia Corsini, Dr George Fern, Professor Karnik Tarverdi) and Business & Marketing (Prof Danae Manika), interweaving behaviour change, public health protection, resource and waste management, governance aspects and sustainability design considerations. Current research projects include:

- Reusable packaging systems in the UK grocery and retail sector (Dr Corsini)
- A systems analysis approach to reduce plastic waste in Indonesian societies (Dr Jobling, Dr Ceschin, Dr Iacovidou, Dr Henderson, Dr Katsou, Prof Tarverdi)³
- A Circular Economy approach to improving plastic waste management through Deposit Return Schemes (DRS) (Dr Iacovidou)
- Providing the 30% recycled content for food packaging (PFP): An integrated stakeholder approach to solving 'hard to recycle' plastic packaging (Dr George Fern, Dr Lesley Henderson)⁴

³ [https://www.brunel.ac.uk/research/projects/mitigating-plastic-waste-in-indonesia#:~:text='A%20systems%20analysis%20approach%20to,\)'%20is%20an%20interdisciplinary%20project.&text=An%20investment%20of%20%C2%A320,plastic%20pollution%20in%20developing%20countries.](https://www.brunel.ac.uk/research/projects/mitigating-plastic-waste-in-indonesia#:~:text='A%20systems%20analysis%20approach%20to,)'%20is%20an%20interdisciplinary%20project.&text=An%20investment%20of%20%C2%A320,plastic%20pollution%20in%20developing%20countries.)

⁴ <https://www.ukri.org/news/8-million-for-sustainable-plastics-research-projects/>