



The Responsible
Business Network
Northern Ireland



TACKLING THE PLASTICS PROBLEM

**A View from Key Stakeholders
in Northern Ireland**

Funded by:



Recent high-profile media coverage has pushed the issue of plastics in the environment to the forefront of public consciousness.

Michael Gove 'haunted' by plastic pollution seen in Blue Planet II

The Guardian, 19/12/18

Dutch supermarket launches plastic-free aisles

ITV, 28/02/18

Families ditching plastic after Blue Planet warning

The Times, 22/02/18

Balearic Islands to ban plastic by 2020 in bid to clean its beaches

The Telegraph, 17/01/18

Record levels of plastic discovered in Arctic sea ice

The Guardian, 24/04/18

Drinks bottles and can deposit return scheme proposed

BBC, 28/03/18

As public scrutiny of the use of plastics – particularly single-use plastics – increases, government, as well as the polymers and food industries, are starting to respond. Whilst individual actions are welcome, it is important that stakeholders develop a collective understanding of their approaches and work together. With this in mind, Business in the Community Northern Ireland and WRAP Northern Ireland convened a group of stakeholders from industry, research, and NGOs at The MAC, Belfast, to discuss a circular economy for polymers in a local context. The group aimed to develop an understanding of how different stakeholders are responding to this issue, and to identify practical opportunities to accelerate local action.

A view of the issue: where we are now, as expressed by stakeholders at the event

- We rely on plastic; plastic in itself is not bad – it's how we manage it after use that is the problem
- In Northern Ireland, we can't rely on a European Circular Economy package, but instead need to bring the plastics circular economy issue closer to home
- A barrier to increasing the amount of recycled content in plastic items produced in Northern Ireland is that it is difficult for manufacturers to get a consistent, high quality, supply of recycled materials suitable for incorporating into packaging
- Some packaging and food product manufacturers are already acting in anticipation of shifting customer requirements, others are feel that they need to wait for the market to shift. What is clear is that there is a need for joined up action across value chains
- We need to look for local opportunities, whilst also recognising that this system extends beyond Northern Ireland, identifying action which we can take here and now

Priority Actions Identified

	Reprocessing technology	Government policy	Society	Industry
The need for change		Understand implications of exporting plastic waste to developing countries – what are the impacts for the country, and what will be the effects of China’s restriction on importing waste.		Take notice of public opinion – take responsibility for packaging pollution in the oceans – don’t wait to react – act now to ensure recycled content in products and extend the life of polymers through successive cycles.
Collaboration	Communication between packaging manufacturers and reprocessors to allow reprocessing technology to develop and increase polymer recycling and recovery.	Government bodies should promote collaboration opportunities presented by Invest NI and research institutes, including product development and testing.	Government, Local Government and Industry should work together to ensure consistency of approach to ensure public engagement – eg recycling systems, messaging, universal signage etc.	Important to learn from other sectors, and to engage with the whole value chain to develop sustainable packaging solutions, eg use of a single polymer. Engaging with the retail sector is vital for success. Take leads from those committing to the UK Plastics Pact ¹ . Industry should make use of opportunities presented by Invest NI and research institutes, including product development and testing.
Investing to create change		Invest in appropriate collection, segregation and separation facilities to allow effective systems to develop.		Challenges should drive innovation. Don’t say “we can’t...” but instead innovate to find a solution.
Bringing citizens along		Create uniformity between council recycling collections and messaging.	Promoting behaviour change of consumers through EcoSchools, employees in companies through NGOs, and citizens through councils.	
Developing new policy		Ensure effective consultation with industry to understand what policy changes are likely to work best.		Understand the implications, positive and negative, that a deposit return scheme (or other legislation) would have in Northern Ireland and investigate whether there are more effective options.

¹ <http://www.wrap.org.uk/content/the-uk-plastics-pact>