



*Getting glass recycling right
for the future – event report*

British Glass

July 2020



British Glass

Event details

On 25th June 2020, British Glass hosted a digital roundtable with a panel of leading figures to discuss the future of UK glass recycling. The event, attended by over 100 stakeholders from across industry and government, discussed the importance of delivering a recycling system which would optimize glass recycling rates, as well as help the UK meet its broader, long-term sustainability objectives.

Event speakers

Dave Dalton – Event Chair and Chief Executive of British Glass

Paul Vanston – Chief Executive Officer of the Industry Council for Packaging and the Environment (INCPEN)

Andy Rees – Head of Waste Strategy, Welsh Government

Sue Hayman – Former Shadow Secretary of State for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs

Introduction and Overview

Dave Dalton, Chief Executive of British Glass, introduced the session, welcoming members of the panel as well as the audience to the discussion. Thanking presenters for their contribution to the debate, Mr Dalton provided a brief introduction to British Glass, before highlighting the importance of discussing the future of glass recycling in the current climate, with the imminent passing of the Environment Bill expected and the future of the UK's recycling infrastructure set to change. Mr Dalton emphasised the need ensure the long-term health of UK glass recycling, before inviting speakers to discuss their thoughts and opinions.

Policy and political context

Event sponsor Sue Hayman, former Shadow Environment Secretary, provided an overview of the current political landscape with regards to environmental policy, and discussed how the increased public interest around waste and recycling in recent years has impacted on the decisions and policy positions of political stakeholders. Ms Hayman offered her perspective on the key issues around recycling during her time as Shadow DEFRA secretary, discussing her interest in the discrepancies between local authority recycling rates, before highlighting the need for a more streamlined approach to UK recycling policy. Touching upon the notion that EPR would prove an attractive prospect for government officials currently battling the fiscal challenges of coronavirus, Ms Hayman suggested that EPR would ensure greater levels of funding for local councils to enhance their kerbside recycling practices without having to rely too heavily on central government funding.

Moving on, Ms Hayman raised a number of important considerations on the issue of DRS, including whether the inclusion of glass in such a system would lead to people having to drive to their nearest bottle return point due to the weight of glass bottles compared to other materials, such as plastic or aluminum, highlighting the potential unintended environmental impacts of including glass in a DRS.

Whilst acknowledging that DEFRA were looking closely at the issue of unintended consequences of a DRS, Ms Hayman suggested that it would be beneficial to trial keeping glass at the kerbside in collaboration with EPR in order to establish which system produces the highest possible recycling rates and more broadly, environmental benefits. Concluding, Ms Hayman acknowledged that DEFRA's work had been heavily impacted by the coronavirus pandemic, as well as the ongoing Brexit negotiations, before remarking that the glass industry has an opportunity to showcase to political stakeholders which recycling system will provide the greatest overall benefits to the future of UK recycling.

Understanding the UK's current recycling system – what lies ahead?

Speakers provided a thorough evaluation of the UK's current recycling infrastructure, and discussed the UK's current recycling infrastructure as well as broader sustainability targets, before emphasising the need to not only improve recycling systems, but also narrow the gap in recycling rates between local authorities. Whilst the panel noted that the UK was currently ahead of EU recycling targets across all materials, speakers stressed that a greater emphasis on changing cultural

norms around waste and recycling would be needed for the UK to achieve its more ambitious, long term sustainability targets. Panelists also pointed out that if the UK was to improve its current recycling standing, it would be important to try and increase the volume of household recycled materials, something which has held steady over the last few years.

Paul Vanston, CEO of INCPEN discussed the need to find an appropriate mix of recycling systems in order to ensure the long-term reliability of UK recycling, with a balance needing to be struck between schemes in order to maximize the volume of recycled materials. He described how there was no “silver bullet” to the design of a “future-proof” system, arguing that whilst changes to the current system were needed, it would be important to focus on the outcomes of the new scheme and understand which balance between systems would deliver the greatest overall recycling and broader environmental benefits in the long term.

The panel also agreed that more needed to be done by government and industry leaders to improve consumer behavior towards recycling. Whilst the panel noted that in recent years, environmental policy and sustainability have garnered greater levels of public interest, there was a consensus that more needed to be done to educate, encourage and communicate with the wider public to help them understand the wide-ranging benefits recycling can bring.

Looking to Wales – learning lessons from a proven system

Dr Andy Rees, Head of Waste strategy for the Welsh Government, provided a brief overview of Wales’ recycling strategy, and discussed the steps the devolved administration had taken in recent years which have led to Wales enjoying the third highest household recycling rate in the world.

Discussing how Wales has enjoyed consistently high recycling rates across its 22 local authorities, Dr Rees provided an in-depth overview of the various legislative and funding policies which have allowed for such high collection levels, emphasizing how ambitious recycling objectives had been set in legislation to encourage LA’s to meet their targets. Noting that the Welsh Government had provided over £1bn to local authorities since 2002 to help improve their recycling infrastructure, Dr Rees described how EPR proved an attractive policy, with the majority of previous funding coming from the devolved administration.

Dr Rees highlighted that whilst Wales enjoyed higher overall household waste recycling rates compared to England, Northern Ireland and Scotland, glass recycling rates were higher than any other material, with 87.3% of waste glass collected at the kerbside being recycled. Dr Rees described how the Welsh collection system contributed to high recycling levels, with resource recovery vehicles able to collect various different waste streams from the kerbside during a single collection, meaning only one vehicle collecting all recyclables.

On the subject of DRS, Dr Rees discussed how it would play an important part of Wales’ future recycling infrastructure in coordination with EPR, before discussing in relation to littering how he hoped it would incentivise many who decide to litter their bottles to return them. On the subject of technology, Dr Rees described how the Welsh Government was also looking at ways which may see the incorporation of DRS into kerbside, with individuals scanning their bottles into their kerbside collection bins and reclaiming their deposit electronically. Whilst noting that kerbside would still play an important part of Wales’ future recycling infrastructure, especially for glass jars, Dr Rees remarked that communication between local authorities and members of the public would be key to seeing increased recycling rates.

Discussion points

Concerns around a Deposit Return Scheme

On the issue of the introduction of a DRS, members of the panel conceded that there were a range of difficulties with the implementation of the system – especially for glass.

COVID-19 – Drawing on the current COVID-19 crisis, speakers emphasized how recycling rates would have collapsed if the majority of RVMs had been placed in stores which then had to close, with some questioning what would be the contingency strategy should the UK experience something similar to COVID-19 again in the future. The panel discussed how a DRS, which relies on in-store RVMs, would not be sufficiently flexible to meet the challenges of the coronavirus crisis, and called for a more comprehensive assessment of the UK’s future recycling infrastructure in light of these challenging times.

Social implications – The panel discussed the possible unintended consequences of such a system, with many questions from the audience also asking how the UK would counteract the damaging side effects of a DRS should it become part of a future recycling strategy. The issue of a possible “scavenger culture”, whereby individuals might root through waste bins in order to collect possible deposits was discussed, with the panel drawing on international comparisons to highlight the harmful impacts of such a consequence. Furthermore, several speakers took the time to draw upon the socioeconomic impacts of a potential DRS, with some drawing on the regressive and discriminatory way it may discourage recycling amongst vulnerable and elderly communities. One panel member questioned what support would be given to help vulnerable members recycle their bottles through a DRS if they would be unable to leave their homes, questioning if local authorities would have the capability to provide a comprehensive support network.

Interplay between DRS and EPR – Speakers took the opportunity to raise questions about how DRS and EPR would interplay in any future system, with one panel member describing how there needed to be high levels of collaboration between the two systems in order to maximize any possible synergies, and ultimately reduce household waste as well as on-the-go littering. Members of the panel agreed that a more comprehensive assessment should be undertaken into the benefits of a DRS, looking at how the scheme can work alongside EPR and kerbside collections to deliver the highest possible recycling rates. Speakers discussed the need to streamline the UK’s system, making it easier to understand and use for consumers as well as local authorities, with some questioning whether the parallel implementation of a multitude of systems could deliver a simplified approach to the future system.

Members of the panel agreed that ensuring widespread public buy-in to the future system would be key, with some suggesting that even with a well-designed, highly efficient system encompassing a mix between kerbside, EPR and possible DRS, if public behavior towards waste and recycling does not change, then the new infrastructure will not deliver on its potential.

The role of refillable glass

The panel were asked about the role of refillable glass, and whether refillables will have a greater role to play in the future. Whilst recognising that some manufacturers would be interested in refillables, the panel discussed the difficulty in changing consumer attitudes towards refillables, especially in light of COVID-19. Due to the lack of refillable infrastructure in the UK, a commitment to increasing volume would take significant commitment from various brands and other supply chain partners to make a strong business case to increase the role of refillables. The panel discussed how other countries which have a stronger “return culture” could perhaps benefit greater from increased refillable glass, whilst some members discussed that due to the infinitely recyclable nature of glass, ensuring robust recycling infrastructure would be of primary importance in relation to refillables. Others commented on the benefits of EPR and discussed how many of the issues which refillable glass looks to solve will benefit from expanding EPR, providing local authorities with more funding to tackle littering and provide adequate recycle points.

The future of glass

Some panel members took the opportunity to discuss what the future may bring with regards to glass recycling, commending British Glass’ target of achieving a 90% glass collection rate by 2030, whilst also noting however that significant challenges lie ahead to make it a reality. Members discussed the best way forward to achieve this milestone, outlining how the industry needed to present detailed policy proposals to government stakeholders to show them the best way to achieving this target. Many commented on the importance of government engagement, discussing how the glass industry needs to continue to work with the government to ensure the UK develops a future-proof recycling system which avoids damaging socioeconomic and environmental consequences, whilst ensuring the highest possible levels of glass recycling.

British Glass – Recycle it Right

For more information about British Glass’ *Recycle it Right* campaign and our vision for the future of glass recycling, please visit www.britglass.org.uk/recycle-it-right