

Transcript of 'Urgh! Bin Juice!'

Season 2, Episode 17, Transforming Tomorrow

[Theme music]

Paul: Today's episode is all about recycling, bin juice and the Mafia. That's all I'm gonna say. It's time for our episode with Clare Mumford from Lancaster University and Richard Hudson from the Chartered Institution of Wastes Management.

[Theme music]

Paul: Hello, and welcome to Transforming Tomorrow, the podcast from the Pentland Centre for Sustainability in Business here at Lancaster University Management School. I'm Paul Turner.

Jan: And I'm Professor Jan Bebbington.

Paul: Jan, we're coming close to the end of our journey through the plastic pipeline.

Jan: And where are we in that pipeline?

Paul: Well, we've dealt with production of plastic packaging. We've dealt with consumption of plastic packaging. We've even spoken to the supermarket to retail plastic packaging. I think it's about time we started to look at post-consumption and waste management.

Jan: That's a very bright idea. So who have we got to talk to today on that topic?

Paul: Well, we've got two people. We've got Dr Clare Mumford from here at Lancaster University, and then we've got Richard Hudson, who is joining us remotely from the Chartered Institution of Wastes Management. Welcome to you both.

Richard: Good afternoon.

Paul: First of all, it'd be good to get an idea about yourselves, your expertise, and how you fit into the PPIPL project.

So, Clare, start with you, Clare. You just give us an idea of what your expertise is, research wise, and where you fit into PPIPL.

Clare: Sure. Okay. So, I came into the PPIPL project about halfway through, to be honest. One of the other Research Associates had left and they were looking, um, for a new Research Associate to work on the waste management and recycling work package, work package for.

So Matteo did the first bit of work with Alison Stowell and John Hardy as the leads. And then I came in and did, I would argue the more exciting stuff of actually following the packaging from site to site and seeing what happens to our, our waste as it got, um, managed and reprocessed.

Paul: It's always good when you get to come into a project just as the exciting work starts, isn't it? [Clare laughs] And we should all do that. Just leave someone else to do all the boring work stuff and then you just come in and do the exciting stuff.

Jan: It actually is a good idea to come in. And what kind of discipline background do you have, Clare, that made that an exciting piece of work?

Clare: I've done research projects, before, before I came to Lancaster, uh, at various universities, I've always, um, been a Research Associate and they've always been in Management Schools.

So it was about workers, how work is organized, the, the kind of the meaning of work, the subjective experience of work. So I really had no knowledge whatsoever of, um, plastics of waste management or recycling. So I was kind of very much a naive researcher coming into this.

Paul: I suppose there's advantages that, that you're not coming in with any preconceptions.

Clare: Absolutely, yes. I think I probably drove quite a lot of the participants mad by asking kind of ridiculous, sort of very basic questions, but it was useful.

Paul: I would say, welcome to our podcast in that case because yes, we, we now ask all the ridiculous and obvious questions that we should know the answers to.

Um, Richard, how about you and the Chartered Institution for Wastes Management? How do you fit into the whole PPIPL project?

Richard: We've been involved as one of the, uh, one of the industry partners. So as, as the Chartered Institution of Wastes Management, we, we represent

about 7,000 or so, uh, professionals within the, the resources and, and waste, um, sector.

We, we're quite a broad church, so we have people who work for local authorities. We have people who work for the waste management companies. We have people working for the environment agency, the recyclers, and all points in, in, in between. So I think, you know, for us it was really a great opportunity to, to get a better understanding in, in, into sort of consumer attitude and, and behaviours.

Because ultimately, you know, we, we live and die by some of the decisions and some of the actions that, that, that are made by the householders and the, and the consumers. So I, I think I've been involved in this, it was one of the first things I was involved with and I, I've worked for the Institution for over three years now. So yeah, it's, it's probably getting on for three years.

Paul: And what's your personal role within the institution then? What, what's your responsibilities?

Richard: I'm a technical manager within the, the policy and technical department. So my sins, my, my, my background is, is actually plastics and plastics processing.

Um, I did my degree in, in, in plastics technology back in, well, let's not mention it [laughter from Paul and Jan] late eighties, let's leave it at that. Um, and worked in, in the actual manufacturer and the, the processing of plastics and about 20 years ago got involved in, in this, this, this strange thing called the waste management industry.

And anybody who, who knows that sector knows that once it gets your claws into you, you never, you never leave. Because it is a, it's a fascinating, fascinating area. I think our, our role in the project was to maybe do some sort of a sense check on, on what happens to the waste after it's been deposited by the householder.

Little bit of background on its on its journey and how it then hopefully finds its way to this, uh, this second, second life that we all hope that it has.

Paul: It's always interesting to note when someone's made that transition from what we used to call when I was a journalist, poacher turned gamekeeper.

You've worked in the plastics industry and now you are in the, the waste management and how to dispose of plastics, sort of seeing that two different aspects.

Clare: Erm, I would just like to say what a godsend Richard was when I first started the project as well 'cause I would ask him like, what does jazz plastic mean?

And he would, you know, tell me and explain and help me navigate through as I started.

Paul: So when you said earlier that people were getting annoyed of all the questions you're asking, it was actually Richard...

Clare: ...it's Richard, yeah.

Paul: Yes. Yeah. He seems like a very temperamental fellow who would get very annoyed about all these questions. Obviously, yes.

Richard: You can never be annoyed about questions about waste and plastic. It's, uh. Yeah, it's a passion.

Jan: So we've, um, encountered professional bodies before in our work on the podcast. And so I, I wonder if you could tell us something about the history of, uh, the institution and also what it does. We know a little bit about who belongs to it, but it'd be nice to hear a bit more about it before we head off on our post-consumer journey.

Richard: Yeah, certainly. I mean, we've, we're a very, very old institution. We were founded in, uh, I think back in 1898, I think it was. As all good institutions we were founded in a, a room above a public house, um [Jan laughs] in this case in, uh, Manchester. And at the time we were known as the Association of Cleansing Superintendents of Great Britain.

And that then evolved, you know, throughout, throughout the years. And as, as the industry's changed, you know, we've uh, we've also changed as well. And we very much, you know, see our role in, in, in terms of A - the professional development of our members. So we do a lot of, um, professional training. We have, um, an arm that's known as whammy tab, which does a lot of the vocational training within the, within the resources and waste management industry.

But we also, we also look to represent the interest of our members in, in, in terms of keeping them informed of regulation and, um, legislative changes and, and also, to try and be the voice of, of our sector, represent our, our members in front of, of, of government and, and various government, government departments.

You know, we also see ourselves very much, I think at the heart of the, the move towards more of a circular economy and, and, and certainly Net Zero. So we also have a, a sister organization called, um, the Circular Economy Institute and it's network of, um, of circular economy clubs.

So that, that's very much looking more at the, the sustain, sustainability, um, side of the sector as well. So in total, we're looking at around about 17,000, 17,000 members.

Paul: I just wanna check here, Richard, because as anyone who's ever been to the cinema or watched television, and hears the phrase, waste management, are you actually a front for the Mafia?

[Jan laughs]

Richard: [joking] I mean, that's, uh, that's an outrageous question. Um [laughter]

Paul: That's exactly what I remember of the Mafia would say, isn't it?

Jan: Yeah, yeah...

Richard: Absolutely. Um, I, I think unfortunately, the, the waste industry has been used as a front by, by criminal gangs for, for, for a number of years. You've got the legitimate side of the, uh, of the industry, which of course is represented by, uh, CIWM and, and our members.

But, you know, we, we can't walk away from the fact that waste crime is a, is, is, is a really big issue. And a lot of that waste crime is, is actually the result of, uh, of organised criminal gangs operating who, who see relatively rich, low risk pickings in this sector. Unfortunately.

Clare: In our data collection, I was really happy that we finished our collection just at the point where people were going, well, this is a shady area, I'm not sure that I'd want to say very much more about these practices. So, uh, luckily we didn't encounter that, but, um, there were certain areas that I'm glad we didn't have to go into.

Jan: And I thought, and I thought you were just being provocative, Paul [Clare laughs], but an absolutely spot on question as ever.

Paul: I I, I find that sometimes the most provocative questions lead to the most unexpected answers. Yeah. Yeah. That's it. It's true. So. We're obviously looking at one particular area of waste when it comes to the PPIPL project, which is plastics. So why is the processing of plastics through things such as recycling such a big issue?

Richard: The thing that a lot of people forget is, is that fundamentally virtually all plastics are recyclable. The problem that that you have is that they're actually a very, I'm, I'm personifying plastics now, which, which probably shows you how, how, how sad I can be and how long I've been in this industry, but 'cause plastics aren't very sociable.

Plastics do not like one another. You know, they've all got very different types of plastics, have got very different characteristics. They, they process at different temperatures. They've got very, very different properties, and even within the same classes. So for instance, you know, you have PET, polyethylene terephthalate plastic, which is used for mineral water bottles and, and your fizzy drinks, but also films and, and trays and things like that.

The, the materials actually have to, um, have to be kept separate during their reprocessing because they have very, very different properties, and that's the problem. You know, individually plastic recycling wouldn't be a problem. But when you throw in all the different types of plastics that you've got and all the different grades and, and everything else, it becomes very, very, very problematical.

Which is why, you know, I think we have, you know, historically the, the low recycling rates that we, that we have.

Jan: Is that an argument then for simplifying the manufacturing of plastic? So we manufacture a smaller subset, or will we lose the functionality that plastic brings in the, in the packaging world, if we did that?

Richard: I think it's like a lot of things in this, um, in this debate, you know, you, you are actually treading a fine line, and on the one hand I think it, standardisation would, would certainly, certainly improve and, um, help things. And I think probably later on in the podcast we can maybe touch on, you know,

some of the, certainly some of the legislation that's actually coming out that, that will, that'll help that.

But, you know, we also mustn't forget that, that that packaging is there for a reason. You know, packaging is, is there pre predominantly to, to protect and to preserve the products in inside it. And, you know, at the end of the day, plastics are almost a victim of its own success. It's an incredibly efficient material at, at doing what it's doing.

It's, it's, it's lightweight, it's, it's hygienic, it's relatively cheap, and as a result we have this, um, you know, profligation in the, the amount of applications for it. So, yeah, I, I think we will see, you know, more and more standardisation, but at the same times, I think sometimes performance will always, always need to be considered.

Clare: I think in our data, we certainly found most participants were calling for more simplicity, simplification, and yet they were recognising that the situation is really complex, that that complexity is just kind of innate in, in, in this work. And, um, we talked to one reprocessor who was trying to work with, um, soft plastics, which is one of the more complex, um, areas for, for recycling.

And, and they were saying, well, we've got all these different layers in soft plastics, things like bread bags or, you know, pet food pouches or salad bags, or, you know, all these, all these kinda soft plastics that, you know, the flimsy stuff. And we could try and make it simpler. By having less or fewer layers, but the, the packaging would, would, um, become bigger.

You, you wouldn't have such a, a thin layer of film. You'd have kind of millimetres and that would actually really change. The way that packaging is used, is transported. You would, you wouldn't get as many products on the shelf, et cetera, et cetera. So you try and solve simplicity in one area and it makes something else more complex somewhere else in the chain.

So it is a really difficult thing to, to tackle.

Jan: And that's a story we've heard several times in, in the podcast, is that just that sheer complexity and then one choice driving other things which are equally as bad and somehow kind of figuring out all that mess as part of, part of the work. So I think later to that is the idea, um, within your work that predictable waste streams are useful.

So, so Clare, can you tell us what a predictability means in this context and, and why that would be a great thing.

Clare: So this came out from, um, from our analysis of how all the participants we talked to, so we talked to something like 128 people across 65 organisations, and they kind of, um, they, they. Well, from our discussions with them emerged two different scenarios.

An ideal scenario and a worst case scenario. And predictable waste streams were something that were connected to an ideal case scenario where you can predict waste volumes, the materials in waste, um, where it can be managed, um, easily. So the predictable waste streams really is about predictability of volume and of material content.

Uh, if you think about the, the bin sizes, the storage sites, um, where, you know, how, how big the wagons need to be to, to manage waste, to take it from place to place. All that needs to be, um, calculated into local authorities' plans, et cetera, et cetera. I realized how much of it was about logistics. And, and managing waste, um, storing waste, moving waste from one place to another, sorting and separating it out, and then taking one set of bales to one place, another set of bales to another place.

And that predictability kind of, um, builds into that idea about what's gonna happen to this waste? Where is it going and who's gonna use it? And what is it gonna eventually turn into? Um, and if you can't say something about the material properties of the resources that you're receiving, the materials that you're receiving, then that affects what you can do ultimately with that material.

If you can't say, for example, that it comes from food grade packaging, then that has an implication for whether you can turn it back into food grade packaging.

Jan: One imagines as well that if you are a waste reprocessing plant, of which there won't be dozens of them across the UK, but I'm sure that you'll, you'll tell, tell us how many there are.

But if you're, particularly if you're a specialist, one, you need to have a understanding of the flow of your raw materials into your reprocessing plant as well. So that must be pretty hard for, for those guys that are running that part of the system.

Clare: That's right. And certainly there was, um, there was stories that people told us about how after Christmas, you can predict that you'll get huge amounts more purple polypropylene coming from the Christmas chocolate boxes, for example.

So there are certain times that there's a seasonality of waste where you can predict. And yet the waste managers, the recyclers are also having to deal with quite a lot of unpredictability and uncertainty as packaging changes, as materials change, they don't have any control over whether, um, producers are moving to, in inverted commas, biodegradable waste that is gonna affect, affect their own recycling, um, practices.

So that predictability is really important, and yet they have very little control over the materials that they're receiving.

Richard: I think from a, from a waste management point of view, there was a, a classic example of that during, uh, the lockdown, Covid.

Because the, the people who were collecting the waste were, were reporting a massive spike in the amount of, um, HDPE, high density polyethylene milk bottles, in the waste stream with people working from home, and a reduction in the amount of PET bottles, you know, mineral water and, and sports drinks, Coca-Cola and things 'cause people weren't consuming as, as much of that. And you know, as Clare rightly says, you can't, you can't predict that.

The only thing that you could predict is unpredictability and, you know, you then have to build the systems into the process, you know, to, to actually have stock buffers and, and that type of thing, to try and even out some of these, some of these flows. But even with the best will in the world, you, you can't always plan for plan for everything.

Paul: That links into a lot of work that takes place here at the management school around demand forecasting and such. And this isn't an area I'd considered where within demand forecasting, but obviously it does fit in where you, you have, if you've got predictable demand, it's very easy to cope with stock levels and stuff.

But then if you've got unpredictable demand and uneven demand that varies in such a big nature, it's so hard to get your organisation set up. You have to find some kind of like medium way that's getting you, sometimes you'll be slightly overstocked, sometimes you might be slightly understocked, but you

never want to be no stock. And in this case, you never want to be so much waste coming in that you just can't cope with it.

Clare: There's a story as well that we were told by a couple of people where they said one of the competitive advantages that they had was storage space. And so they took materials in that they weren't quite sure what they were gonna do with, if they could use it, but they can store it and they'll have a go when they haven't got anything else that they're processing.

They'll have a go with this stuff and see if they can use it. And so that idea of just space being important was really important in terms of kind of trying things out and innovation. Which I hadn't expected.

Paul: So within the podcast so far, we've spoken a few times about this attitude-behaviour gap around plastics, in a few different contexts. In the context, particularly in recent episodes, of consumer attitude-behaviour gaps, and how they're, treat the way they talk about what they're gonna do with plastics recycling and the way they act, they actually do behave around it.

So what gaps have you found with your work when it comes to the waste management aspect?

Clare: We found three, um, consumer attitude-behaviour gaps. Although the third was actually a reversal. It was a behaviour-attitude gap rather than an attitude-behaviour gap. But I'll, um, I'll go through, through them quite briefly.

There is, um, there is a, an article in the latest version of the 54 Degrees, um, magazine that explains it. But the, the first attitude-behaviour gap we found was really a problem of wanting to avoid environmental damage. So these are all, uh, gaps that came out of the, the way in which, um, our waste management and recycling participants were talking about consumers

But what they were saying was that people are demonising plastics. They don't like plastic because of the way in which they see it as creating environmental damage in a way that is different from other materials. And this largely comes from, um, the Blue Planet program, David Attenborough, I think it was 2017, I think.

And so they, because they don't like plastic, they're moving away to other packaging materials such as biodegradable plastics or things that look possibly like they might not be paper and card, but they look like paper and card. But

what our participants were saying, some of them were saying that actually that doesn't necessarily create more sustainable outcomes.

So there's attitude around plastic is bad because it has environmental damage. The behaviour is to move away from plastic. But the gap there is, it is not necessarily contributing to greater sustainability from, from our recyclers point of view. So that was the first gap.

The second one was about really wanting to avoid waste. So people are getting that message that, um, waste is a bad thing and they want to do something about that. Um, and what they do is to recycle, recycle more, and, um, because they can recycle, they want to recycle as much as possible, and that ends up with them, in their enthusiasm, putting things into their kerbside recycling or to other waste streams, stuff that really shouldn't be in that waste stream.

So this, this idea of recyclability is kind of slightly being misunderstood in that it needs to be operationalised. To be up, to be recyclable, you needed to actually do it in practice. And for that to happen, you need to put recyclable items into the right waste stream to end up in the right place with the right recycling, uh, reprocessing equipment and end markets, et cetera, et cetera.

So for example, we got a story from, again, one of the people who was, um, who were working with film and they said, if we get a PET drinks bottle at our site, we, uh, we think of that as contamination, 'cause we can't do anything with this bottle. It's eminently recyclable, but not for us. So the, the thing that really, that we need to do is kind of teach people that streams are really important.

That the attitude is great to recycle, but that behaviour needs to be, to put the right materials in the right waste stream to end up actually being recycled. And the third gap really the, the behaviour-attitude gap that I was talking about. Largely comes from a problem of trust.

So the behaviour is one that increasingly it's becoming the norm that people do recycle. So recycling is kinda seen as a, a normal practice nowadays. However, people still don't trust that the right thing is being done with their recycling. This, this sense that they're not sure that anything better than if it ends up in landfill is being done.

And they see stories from time to time about how materials are dumped abroad, for example. And it comes back to our comments before about kind of

dubious practices and while that in our data where I was encountering that, was much more about the kinda residual waste and landfill and stuff. But for recyclers, people are not trusting that recycling is happening in, in a great, positive way.

And I think that the gap here is that actually recycling companies are doing huge amounts of work. And the, the question is slightly wrong. They're kind of concentrating on the worst practice and being kind of very mistrustful of what's happening. But actually I would ask what do people think is possible to do with their recycling?

Um, increasingly recycling companies and, uh, food manufacturers, brand companies are working together. And they're really trying hard to, to create what they call closed loops and upcycling materials to...so that food packaging can be turned back into food packaging again.

And we have that already, Richard will know much more than me about this, but it's already happening with things like milk bottles, for example, drinks bottles, P-E-T-H-D-P-E. It's already happening and there is so much stuff coming through. You have to ask, well, what, what are you expecting? This stuff to, to, to be done with? You know what, what, what do you think the outcome is here?

And part of it, I think is just needs to be slightly kinder to the people who are trying to solve some of the problems that we are creating with our waste.

Richard: I think that's a fantastic, well, a few fantastic points that, uh, Clare's, Clare's raised there. Um, you know, we are, this sounds really cheesy and corny and because it's the sort of thing you, you'd hear on Strictly Come Dancing or you know, the X Factor.

But we are, we are all on a journey and, you know, the journey is from, from where we are now to this uplands of, of perfection a few years, you know, down, down the line where, where everything is, is treated the way that it, it should be treated. And, and everything is circular and, and we're not losing any of these resources.

But, but, but we're not there yet. And in order for us to, to get from A to B, um, it, it does involve everybody in the value chain actually doing their bit. Um, as Clare mentioned, you know, the recyclers do a, do a great job at, at dealing

with the material that is, that is presented to them. I think the stages before that, the people who are collecting and, and sorting are doing a good job.

And as householders, if, if we can all play our part in, in terms of putting things in, in the right bin. I wouldn't say don't question things because I think it's, it's right that people are asking questions about what's happening to their, their waste. But I think sometimes everybody will come up with the story about, well, you know, we put it out for recycling and it, it just goes on the same vehicle as, as the residual waste is going on.

So we know it's going off to the landfill, it's going off to the energy from waste plant. Now, no waste management company in their right mind are gonna do that unless there's a very, very good reason for it. Be it, be it contamination, be it, you know, where you mentioned about Christmas, where, you know, waste volumes, um, massively increase and so it puts a lot of pressure on the, on the system.

But, but by and large, if something is collected for recycling, it is gonna go to a, a recycling plant. Unless, there was a very good reason not, which is normally contamination. And that's probably our, our, our, our biggest issue. And I think that a lot of it comes down to the wishcycling.

A lot of it comes down to a point that's made in a number of the reports that I've, that I've read about, you know, the ick factor, the yuck factor of, of packaging, you know, not wanting to, to clean things out because they're too greasy or, you know, you've got meat juices or, or catfood in there.

So, if you don't want to clean the matter that because it, it's, it's turning your stomach, it makes it then very difficult to, to do something about it further on in the, uh, further on in the chain.

Clare: I, I, I'd also like to add as well, I, I absolutely agree with Richard. I think the other thing that people should be asking about is more questions about what recycled content is being added to.

So if we can build the markets and the economics stack up. To use recycled content over virgin plastics or other materials, then that I think would help to, to create that driver for recycling to happen better.

Richard: And I think we've got a particular issue in, in the UK at the moment, and that, that, that's, that's a really interesting point. We have this thing called

the plastic packaging tax whereby plastic packaging placed on the market, unless it has 30% recycled content, um, is subject to a tax.

What we're actually finding is that over half of the, the recycled material that's actually been incorporated in packaging is having to be imported from overseas. Because in the UK we don't have sufficient plastics reprocessing infrastructure to deal with all the materials that's been, that's been generated.

So, you know, there is a, there's an issue there as well. I think that that needs to be addressed going forward.

Jan: And that's a whole new sort of wrinkle on that, 'cause quite often in the past the UK has exported waste, but importing waste in order to, that's really that...Sorry, my mind just blew [general laughter] so I'm gonna have to take wee pause now to get over that [laughing].

Paul: Should we play put some holding music?

Jan: Yeah [laughing] I think that would work well.

Richard: Well we're, we're exporting the waste. It's been processed overseas and then been imported as a, a secondary raw material. So we're not reimporting waste, but we're importing, reimporting a material that has been derived from waste.

But the point is, it's a resource. It's, it's a resource that, that could and probably should have been handled within the UK. If nothing else, it's uh. It's a lost resource, a lost value opportunity.

Jan: Yeah. And I think that, um, yes, that loss of value from the materials we already have is something that I know has exercised governments over time. And actually securing that raw material is a, is a big part of the mix.

Can I maybe sort of head us off towards, um, households because that's, if you like a big part of, um, what might feed into this. And I know there's no such thing as an average household, but do you have a sense, and can you tell our listeners about how much plastic packaging is generated by a household?

Richard: Actually the timing is very, very good 'cause there was a, uh, a webinar this morning by, uh, RECOUP, the organisation that's very heavily involved in, in recycling activities in the UK.

And they come up with a, an annual survey looking at, at household, um, plastics waste generation and their figures at the moment are in, in the UK,

1.35 million tonnes of, uh, packaging placed on the, uh, placed on the market. That was their latest, um, figures of which I think the bottles was 600,000 tonnes.

Um, what they called pots, tubs, and trays, so that's all we you'd mushroom punnets, and the things that your tomatoes come in, everything else, was 450,000 tonnes and then 325,000 tonnes of flexibles of, um, film.

So that's just in the UK per year. So when you think what a, you know, relatively low density material that is in terms of volume, that is, that is huge. It's a, it's a big quantity.

Clare: And I think that the last time I looked, and forgive me, Richard if I'm out of date now, but I think that the, the volume of waste is still growing even though the, the targets are to reduce waste, I think it's still growing by household. Is it, or has it turned now?

Richard: It's, I think we saw a little bit of a, a slowdown probably coming off the back of, of Covid, but we've had, there's a lot of, um, you know, lightweighting activities and, and a lot of material substitutions happening. So I would say probably at the moment [sighs] last couple of years, it went down.

I think it's gone back up again this year, but, but it's, it's essentially, it's essentially staying at about the same. I think it's, it, it certainly isn't coming down in any, you know, significant, uh, amount.

Paul: Well, given that then, what advice could you offer to listeners who might want to decrease the amount of plastic from their households that ends up in landfill?

Clare: Creating less waste is obviously the, the place to start taking the pressures off the whole waste management recycling system by, uh, engaging with refill options. Um, and then the next thing I think would be, really understand recyclability and how it needs us as consumers, as residents to do the right thing with packaging.

Um, and not to create contamination so that things can practically be, be recycled in the best way possible by putting materials in the right stream and following local guidance. So different material reprocessing facilities, MERFs, will, um, sort and separate in possibly in slightly different ways.

So definitely look at your local guidance for what they tell you to put in your kerbside collections and what not to put in, 'cause that will make a difference.

It will help to to recycle more easily.

The other thing would be to, going back to what Richard said before, is to, to wash and clean, um, your packaging. We were looking at sites where the whole floors of, um, uh, MERFs and transfer stations were covered with what they, what they call 'bin juice', you know, this kind of glorious mixture of, um, liquids and bits and pieces of food and rainwater that had got in and it, it was just covering things and it sticks to the surface.

It makes the surfaces of packaging harder to, um, to, for the machines to recognise and to sort into different streams. So certainly washing and cleaning and putting in the right bins is just such an obvious thing to do.

Paul: Bin juice, what a lovely phrase that I never want to hear again. [general laughter]

Richard: Bin juice. [general laughter]

Paul: How about you, Richard? Do what, what advice, ma, might you add on to what Clare said there?

Richard: I, I think we just reemphasise everything that, uh, you know, Clare, Clare said there. I, I think it, it's particularly important as, as well to actually follow the, follow the local advice and the local instructions. Um, and I know sometimes that's quite difficult because I think the, the local authorities over the years have had their budgets absolutely slashed.

And, and one of the, the first thing that often goes is the communications budget. So they're not really able, um, you know, to, to perhaps give the, the printed materials that that, that they used to, I remember, you know, locally where I live in, um, you know, Stafford, we used to get a nice glossy one page A4 every year, which told us what we could put in, what, what we couldn't.

It's still available now, but you've gotta go online, you know, to actually, to actually get that, and I understand the reasons why they've stopped that, it is purely financial. But you know, there's, I thought it was quite interesting, um, reading through some of the, um, household feedback where the number of people who almost recycled on a gut feel, i.e. they, they, they didn't actually base their decision on whether they, to put something in the recycling bin because of something they read or, or something they'd been told it was, well, I just do it.

It, it just feels intuitively right. I think one of the comments was, you know, if it's a soft plastic, no, that's not gonna get recycled. But if it's hard plastic, I'm not even gonna, I'm not even gonna question it.

And that then comes down to the, to the wishcycling. And in many ways it's, it's a great problem for us to have because I think it, it's, it's far better to start from a position of people wanting to, to do the right thing and then educate them otherwise, and to actually try to, you know, coerce them into doing something that, that, that they, they don't want to do.

But, and this is where I mentioned earlier about, you know, everybody in the chain has to almost step up and, you know, we've got to make the householder's job easier. You know, people are making split decisions on, on what to do with these things, so anything that, that, that the, the manufacturers and the producers can actually do to make that easier, you know, good proper labelling and, and everything else that is, that is clear and concise and unambiguous, I think is important.

And hopefully that's one of the things that will improve moving forward.

Clare: And this is what I learned as a, as someone coming into this research, just without any knowledge whatsoever, I hadn't really realised how different plastics were from each other.

I hadn't really realised that hard plastic toys are just fundamentally different to food packaging and that they cannot be recycled into the same kinda product at the end. They don't go down the the, the same routes really. So just that kind of really basic understanding of these different plastics and why some can't be added to the same boxes is really important.

Jan: Well, I hope that there's gonna be an upsurge in searches on Google or whatever search engine you might be using after this podcast go out as people seek to become much more informed about the world around them.

Paul: Are you optimistic about the volume of waste, the nature of packaging, and that there's gonna be changes, positive changes in the future? We'll start with you, Richard?

Richard: Am I optimistic? I'm optimistic that I think there's a lot of things happening that that are gonna make the situation better. Let's, let's say that. Um, in terms of volumes of waste, I think that, that, that really comes down to individual consumers, householders about, you know, embracing, potentially

moving forward, alternative systems such as reuse, or are they prepared to, to actually cut things out altogether? Um, because that, that is also, that is also key.

Where I'm optimistic is with legislation coming through, such as this extended producer responsibility for packaging that's putting the, the onus on the producers to actually bear the, the costs of, of, of managing the plastic waste with the new, simpler recycling regulations.

So, we'll, we'll start to see them come in, in terms of, you know, me as a householder, I'll, I'll start to see that happening in 2026. Businesses will actually see it a year, a year before that. That's going to, I, I think, capture more material and make sure that what we actually capture is handled in a, in a better way.

I hasten to say optimistic because I, I think there is still, I still think we've got a long way to go in, in terms of. We are a society that, that, that worships at the alter of consumption unfortunately. And, and I think unless we start to address some of our attitudes and, and maybe embrace some of the different, you know, business models such as, as reuse and all those, those types of things, we'll be just going to maintain the baseline of where we are at the moment.

Um, but yeah, I'm, I'm certainly happier sat here today than I was this time 12 months ago, which is, which is good.

Clare: Yeah, I, I agree. I, I'm not sure that I'm optimistic wholeheartedly, but, um, I was really blown away by what's happening behind the scenes that I didn't know before this project, and that really does fill me with lots of, um, enthusiasm and, and some optimism.

But I think it depends very much on how we as consumers want to still value convenience and, and kind of just sit here with inertia rather than really valuing sustainability. And, and I, I'm not sure that I feel very optimistic on that front yet, and I would love more to be done on that. That like, like Richard says, that, um, let's knock consumption of its perch a little bit more and then I'll feel happier.

Richard: It's about finding other business models. You know, it, it doesn't, I think there's this whole argument, you know, where we, we equate, you know, consumption with a standard of living and, you know, economic growth.

And I, I think you can have both. Um, you just need to find the right business models. So yeah, that gives me cause for optimism, I would say. Whether I'll see it in my lifetime. I'm not sure.

[general laughter]

Jan: You killed off the optimism. [laughter]

Paul: I thought you were saying you were gonna kill him off then. [general laughter] No, no don't kill the guests, Jan, we've not reached that stage.

Richard: [joking] Harsh!

Paul: Well, thank you very much Richard and Clare for joining us. It's been really interesting.

Clare: Thank you. Thanks for having us.

[Theme music]

Paul: Well, Jan, I've got a big important question for you. If you were a plastic, would you be a social or an unsociable plastic?

Jan: Um, that's hard to know, but I really love the fact that, that Richard saw plastics as with their own personality and their ability to want to mix with some plastics, but not with others. I suspect I'd be a slightly shy plastic.

Paul: A shy plastic. Yeah. He wasn't shy about saying it, but I think he felt he was in a safe place to say it. I think that in certain audiences, and with certain people, if he was to start talking about plastics as people, you know, there would be some eyebrows raised.

But here he realised that he could talk about plastics in that regard, and I think that it fits in with what's been said by other people, uh, on the podcast where we had James and Alex talking about the plastic being a passenger that comes along with us and almost like a character that's on the journey with us.

So I think that, you know, it fits in. He's not the only person who seems to give plastics personality.

Jan: Indeed. And I've, I've worked with quite a few, uh, waste and circular economy people, um, primarily within the Scottish government when I was advisor on, um, their zero waste strategy and then their circular economy strategy.

And he's right. If you catch that bug about waste, you are caught for life and you see it everywhere and you're really rather obsessed about it. And I was really impressed that the Chartered Institution of Wastes Management had been obsessed about it since 1898. That was fantastic.

Paul: Yeah. I, I wouldn't have believed it was 126 years old...

Jan: ...yeah...

Paul: ...but it is, it's very old. It's, you know, it's got that heritage there. You think about waste management, you think, ah, it must be something in the 20th Century. But then I guess if you suppose, you think back to the Victorian area and that's when Bazalgette was doing the sewers in London and the different types of waste were coming into focus and trying to make place a bit nicer. So yeah, it, it does, it does fit in.

Jan: But then there was bin juice.

Paul: There was, there was bin juice and the Mafia...

Jan: Yes [laughing]

Paul: ...yeah. And, uh, the, they, they're, you know, controversial areas to be discussing on a, a, a podcast. But yeah, bin juice did sound a bit disgusting, I have to say. I'd very happily not be rooting through bins and ending up with my feet, wading in bin juice.

Jan: Yeah, I know, that's pretty amazing. But also that there is a criminal element to this because it's, you know, it's high value materials. It might be also high value to be paid to take them away, but then maybe not dispose of them correctly. So, so it is, um, that's a big area.

Paul: And that ties in with the other thing that we were talking about, about trust and how consumers don't necessarily have the trust that when they do put plastic into recycling, that it's gonna be properly recycled rather than being put in with the rest of landfill just being put on a boat and never seen again, and not actually been properly dealt with.

The two areas overlap mightily, but as Clare and Richard were keen to stress. If stuff is ending up in landfill, there's a good reason for it. It might be bin juice...

Jan: ...yes...

Paul: ...it might be something else, but there are reasons for it. Generally, practitioners in this area are doing their very best to try and make sure that the waste management of plastic recycling is as well done as well as it can be.

Jan: And maybe my mind drifted a bit, but I also took a good lesson about, um, eating your Christmas chocolates slowly so that you don't get that big sort of peak in the waste stream from, from the, you know, the, the liners for...

Paul: ...yeah...

Jan: ...chocolate boxes.

Paul: Yeah, the purple plastic. I mean, I can't imagine which particular brand they're talking about, but it is, it is notable that when I think about, I can't think anything else that is wrapped in purple or comes in purple plastic tubs than that particular, uh, chocolate brand. But blue plastic, which is the, you know, one of the main competitors, I can think of a few things that come in there.

Yeah, who would've thought that...

Jan: ...yeah...

Paul: ...that all these waste management companies had to account for an upsurge in purple plastic packaging after Christmas.

Jan: That's amazing.

Paul: It is. So we're almost at the end of our series now on the Plastic Packaging in People's Lives project. We've got one more episode to go

Jan: And I guess this is the, the very last people in the, in the chain of, of plastic as it passes through various households that we've been looking at.

Paul: I believe it's, yeah, they're probably at a similar stage of the process as the Chartered Institution of Wastes Management, because it's Lancaster City Council. They collect the waste and then they pass it on to be dealt with by the people who deal with whatever happens to the recycling.

We're gonna be speaking to Carly Sparks from Lancaster City Council. She's gonna be telling us all about issues that the council have and what they've learned from the Plastic Packaging People's Lives Project, which they've been a big part.

[Theme music]

Jan: Brilliant. I look forward to it.

Paul: Until then, thank you very much for listening. I'm Paul Turner.

Jan: And I'm Professor Jan Bebbington.

[Theme music]