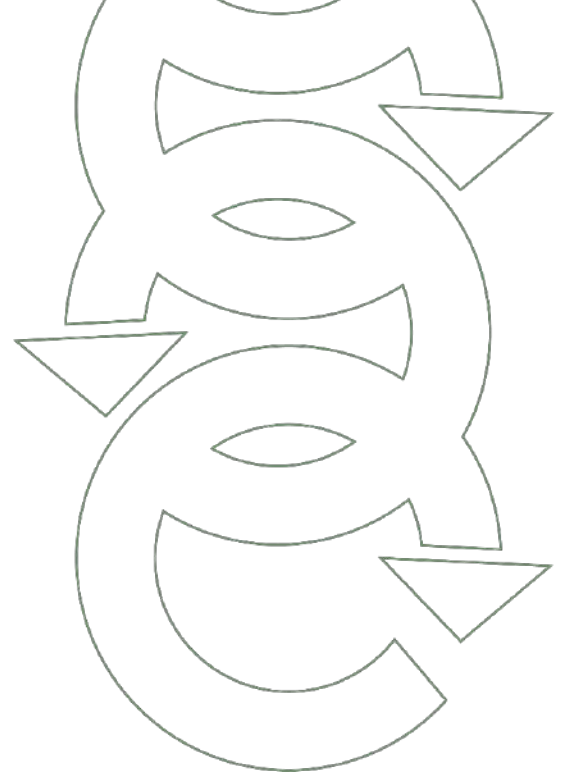


RECOUP

Leading a more circular
plastics value chain

UK Citizen Plastics Recycling Behaviors Insights Survey 2023

November 2023



How do you recycle
your household
plastics





RECOUP is the UK's leading independent authority and trusted voice on plastics resource efficiency and recycling. As a registered charity, our work is supported by members who share our commitments including a more sustainable use of plastics, increased plastics recycling, improved environmental performance and meeting legislative requirements. We achieve these by leading, advising, challenging, educating, and connecting the whole value chain to keep plastics in a circular system that protects the environment, underpinned by evidence and knowledge.

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This report has been written by:

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November 2023

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Foreword

For almost a decade RECOUP's citizen facing arm, Pledge2Recycle Plastics¹ has been engaging with the community educating and cutting through citizen confusion about plastics recycling. RECOUP, through Pledge2Recycle Plastics, prides itself in being the only organisation that nationally engages with citizens with a 'boots on the ground' approach as well as supplying resources for local authorities and education establishments to tap into. The plastics recycling messaging is rooted in the practical knowledge of how kerbside plastics packaging is sorted, captured, reprocessed and end markets for that material.

Throughout 2022, Pledge2Recycle Plastics have been developing a simplified set of messaging for citizens which does not fixate on the differences between national kerbside collections but instead focuses attention on the similarities. In asking the question "how can we help citizens become less confused, recycle more and recycle right", the focus for 2023 has been to communicate a simple and concise set of guidelines reducing the amount of 'exceptions to the rule'. It is also hoped that this will contribute to reducing recycling contamination, an ongoing issue with national rejection rates between 13 – 14%.

RECOUP have conducted previous citizen behavioural insight studies² including work with Watch Me Think in 2019³ This previous research led to the Kent Understanding Plastics Project⁴ where citizen communications were trialled and tested in a 'live lab' situation. This work then led to a project in County Durham (County Durham Recycles Plastic)⁵ aimed at testing the simpler recycling narratives.

External factors such as the pandemic no longer seem to have strong influence on recycling rates and in conversations with communities in 2023 it no longer formed part of the dialogue. Conversations with shoppers in retail environments seemed to be filtered through the lens of inflation and the cost-of-living crisis.

The RECOUP UK Household Plastic Packaging Collection Survey 2022⁶, estimated that around 833,000 tonnes of rigid plastics packaging were not placed by citizens for collection kerbside. Recycling rates for 2022 were estimated at 63% for plastic bottles, and 38% of plastic pots, tubs and trays consumed were placed for recycling kerbside by residents. The RECOUP UK Household Plastic Packaging Collection Survey 2023⁷ reports a reduction in the amount of plastics packaging placed on the market from 1447kt to 1375kt for consumer plastic packaging – a 72kt (5%) decrease.

With the plastic bottle recycling rate stagnating at 63% and a small 1% increase in pot, tub, and tray recycling to 39%. The number of local authorities collecting pots, tubs and trays has risen to 88% and those collecting films and flexibles falls slightly to 12% with an estimated 7% collection rate.

¹ Pledge2Recycle Plastics was previously branded Pledge4Plastics and launched in September 2014. The rebrand took place in May 2018.

² RECOUP UK Household Plastic Packaging Collection Survey 2022

³ Consumer Attitudes and Behaviour - Plastics Packaging 2016 – conducted by ICARO & RECOUP (Pledge4Plastics), funded by M & S. Citizens Plastics Recycling Behaviours Insights Survey 2021

⁴ <https://www.recoup.org/p/348/pledge-2-recycle-plastics-consumer-insight-recycling-study-2019>

⁵ www.recoup.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/uk-household-plastic-packaging-collection-survey-2022-full-report-5123-1672931733.pdf

⁶ www.durhamrecycles.co.uk

⁷ www.recoup.org/resources/reports

Executive Summary

RECOUP's Pledge2Recycle Plastics brand updated their online Citizen Plastics Recycling Behaviours Insights Survey on the 29th March 2023. The survey takes the form of an informal questionnaire and was used both online and in face-to-face settings. Responses were driven through social media (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, LinkedIn); Local Authority websites; and for County Durham was hosted on a new website (www.durhamrecycles.co.uk). RECOUP and Durham County Council partnered to deliver a plastics recycling community-based education programme launched in May 2023.



These results concentrate on the responses up to 9th November 2023 at 2424 responses received for the whole of the UK and 460 for County Durham. The survey asked respondents to declare how and if they recycled plastics packaging every time, sometimes, and if not why. Comparisons were also made with the previous Citizen Plastics Recycling Insights Survey 2021⁸, where nationally 95% of respondents claimed to recycle drinks bottles every time. In 2023 this had dropped by 7% to 88% of respondents declaring this behaviour. However, 97% of County Durham respondents declared they recycle drinks bottles every time an increase of 2% on 2021 and an upshift of 9% on the national average.

As part of the County Durham Recycles Plastics project, leaflets were distributed countywide (247,000 households), and contact made with local parish councils, and schools. Pledge2Recycle Plastics engaged with County Durham citizens at events, community groups, retail environments, as well as social media and local press advertisements.

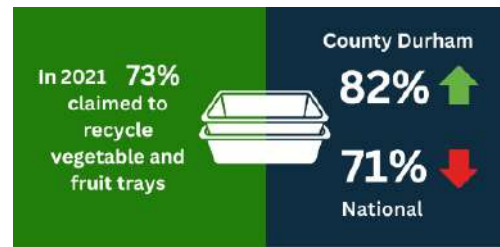
Recycling from the bathroom has previously been a target area in terms of Pledge2Recycle Plastics communications to increase the capture of 'other' plastic bottles. Those declaring to recycle every time dropped nationally by 5% to 78% whilst for County Durham this rose by 5%, with 88% of respondents declaring they recycle these bottles every time.



In the 2021 insights survey 62% of respondents said they recycle raw meat trays every time, in 2023 this dropped 9% to 53%. In face-to-face questionnaires citizens cited they were uncertain about the impact raw meat had on the tray's recyclability and were wary of kitchen contamination from rinsing out raw meat packaging as reasons for not recycling.

⁸ www.recoup.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/citizen-plastics-recycling-behaviours-insights-study-2021-final-020222-1643892961-2.p

Those respondents claiming to recycle plastic fruit and vegetable trays dropped 2% nationally to 71% whilst in County Durham 82% of respondents claimed this behaviour – 9% above the national average.



Confusion continues to prevent recycling and was given as the main reason for not recycling an item with 32% of citizens claiming to be confused around what can be recycled. At the point of recycling other factors heavily influence the outcome such as convenience; if the pack requires cleaning; if the pack confuses because of its colour shape or size; or the pack has tear off sections; or a full sleeve - in short, anything that can add to citizen confusion and require additional intervention by the consumer.



The mismatch between on pack labelling and local authority ‘target/non-target’ listings can conflict, contributing to citizen confusion particularly with items such as toothpaste tubes. If plastics packaging is to improve its reputation to citizens of its circular credentials, then pack claims need to be able to be upheld and supported by the value chain. Technical advances in pack design to render a pack more recyclable by a reprocessor needs to match progress in capture, sorting, and end markets as well as matching local authority target listings before packs can be marked as ‘recyclable’.

The RECOUP UK Household Plastic Packaging Collection Survey 2023⁹ reports a reduction in the amount of plastics packaging placed on the market to 1375kt and a stagnant plastic bottle recycling rate at 63%. Pots, tubs, and trays collection rate increased 1% to 39%, whilst films and flexibles placed for recycling remains at 7%. This citizen insights reflects fewer citizens nationally declaring to recycle bottles every time with an increase in those declaring to recycle pots, tubs and trays.

However, if these behavioural declarations were to be fully reflected kerbside, we would still expect to see a much higher household capture rate. County Durham residents are currently responding more positively which perhaps reflects an increased desire to recycle more as plastics packaging is more prevalent in their minds due to countywide plastics recycling communications.

Plastics packaging is, by its very nature, more complex for citizens to understand than other materials such as glass, metals, cardboard, and paper where shape, size and colour are more standardised. Whilst there is a fixation on the differences between what is collected where via kerbside collections, citizens have even more reasons to believe plastics recycling is complicated and confusing. Clear rules and simple easy to follow guidelines can help citizens navigate this complex area of packaging.

RECOUP have long called for a national plastic bottle recycling message which given 100% of UK local authorities collect this format kerbside is not unachievable. As 88% of local authorities now collect pots, tubs, and trays kerbside, the question is whether there is a willingness across the value chain to concentrate on the similarities in collection to formulate an agreed standard for how citizens can recycle these items correctly. Could the sector voluntarily agree a national call to action, and more importantly could the sector agree how such a campaign should be delivered and funded.

⁹ www.recoup.org/resources/reports

Methodology

This insights work followed on from the previous Citizen Plastics Recycling Behaviour 2021 Report¹⁰ and Consumer Plastic Recycling Behaviour 2019 Study.¹¹ Comparisons have also been drawn between national insights and those gained from the work across Kent via the Kent Understanding Plastics Project delivered in Kent from July 2021 to April 2022 as well as insights in 2023 from County Durham during the County Durham Recycles Plastics project.

The online survey was updated early 2023 and hosted on the RECOUP and Pledge2Recycle Plastics websites. The survey still takes the form of a quiz style questionnaire and remains relaxed in its approach. The links were advertised across social media and local authority websites. There were 2424 responses from across the UK in the period 29th March to 9th November 2023. The survey was promoted to Durham residents via www.durhamrecycles.co.uk with 460 responses from County Durham. 49% of responses came from Facebook nationally and this figure rose to 79% for Durham. A small budget was set aside for Facebook promotion during July through to October 2023.

Face-to-face questionnaires were completed in Durham and Cambridgeshire, these responses were added to the online data. Face-to-Face gave the opportunity to gather wider qualitative insights as to why citizens followed certain patterns of behaviour.

The national data set is lower than the previous study and this is due to the fact that RECOUP was unable to secure retail support for distribution as had been the case in 2021.



**Pledge2
Recycle**
How do you recycle
your household
plastics

The survey asks about the respondent's behaviour when it comes to the recycling of plastic packaging and covers plastic bottles; pots, tubs, and trays (PTT), as well as plastic bags and wrappings (films and flexibles). Each question gives a drop-down list of choices.

¹⁰ www.recoup.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/citizen-plastics-recycling-behaviours-insights-study-2021-final-020222-1643892961-2.pdf

¹¹ www.recoup.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/research-study-into-consumer-plastics-recycling-behaviour-1565267370-1.pdf

Cutting the Confusion: How do you recycle your household plastics (2023)

* 1. Do you recycle the following items of plastics packaging
Select the option that most closely represents your behaviour

Drinks bottles	<input type="text"/>
Cleaning bottles (e.g. bleach, sprays)	<input type="text"/>
Bathroom bottles (e.g. shampoo, bubble bath)	<input type="text"/>
Sauce bottles	<input type="text"/>
Pots (e.g. yoghurt, desserts)	<input type="text"/>
Tubs (e.g. margarine, ice cream)	<input type="text"/>
Fruit & vegetable trays	<input type="text"/>
Raw meat trays	<input type="text"/>
Plastics bags and wrappings	<input type="text"/>

Question: Do you recycle the following items of plastics packaging: *(Select the option that most closely represents your behaviour)*.

Drop Down options;

1. Yes, every time.
2. No.
3. Sometimes.
4. Not sure if I can recycle.
5. Take to front of store.

County Durham Recycles Plastic



From May 2023, RECOUP have been active in County Durham working in partnership with Durham County Council to educate on the plastics recycling message. Encouraging citizens to recycle more and recycle right through direct and indirect communications.

The project was also supported by Biffa and the British Plastics Federation with in-kind support from Marmax Recycled Plastic Products.

A dedicated website was launched www.durhamrecycles.co.uk with easy to access information on plastics recycling kerbside and videos of the plastics recycling journey on a regional basis. In July 2023 residents across the county received direct mail leaflets (247,000 households) and throughout the year the team have engaged at schools, parish council events, retail locations, local community events and the County's main food festival at Seaham in July.

Comparisons have been made between the responses of residents in Durham where there has been ongoing on the ground engagement and UK wide national data. On the ground engagement via Pledge2Recycle Plastics nationally has otherwise concentrated in and around the Cambridgeshire area in 2023.

Points to Note

100% of Local Authorities in the UK collect plastic bottles for recycling at kerbside, 88% collect Pots, Tubs and Trays, and 12% collect Film. Responses for pots, tubs and trays questions will be impacted by the local authority provision. Durham County Council collects plastic pots, tubs and trays and plastic bottles kerbside (except black plastic) and residents are encouraged to take plastic bags and wrappings to front of store options.

What is uncertain is the impact that the pandemic may have had on recycling behaviours in 2021.

Packaging membership organisation, INCPEN with Icaro conducted a GB-wide public survey¹² into public confidence in recycling (www.incpen.org). The study concluded that the lack of information on what happens to recyclates after collection undermines public confidence in recycling. The work also stated that *"conversely, the lack of information can negatively influence public confidence, and impact on citizens' behaviours and municipal recycling rates."* RECOUP were therefore keen to provide information via www.pledge2recycle.co.uk and www.durhamrecycles.co.uk of the plastics recycling journey and videos were commissioned and launched as part of communications to citizens to demonstrate the life-cycle of plastic bottles, pots, tubs and trays when recycled through UK kerbside provisions.

¹² INCPEN's 2021 Survey on Public Confidence in Recycling – Slides presented at RtF Conference – 21 October 2021 – INCPEN

Plastic Bottles

Key Comparisons

Nationally **88%** of residents claim to be recycling drinks bottles every time. This is a drop of **7%** from the 2021 report when **95%** of respondents claimed to be recycling drinks bottles every time. This confidence waned when it came to other types of plastic bottles, with a smaller proportion saying they recycle every time. The number of people declaring to recycle bottles from the bathroom dropped 5% with 78% declaring this behaviour in 2023 whereas in 2021 this had been 83%.

NATIONAL RESPONSES, including County Durham – Plastic bottles.

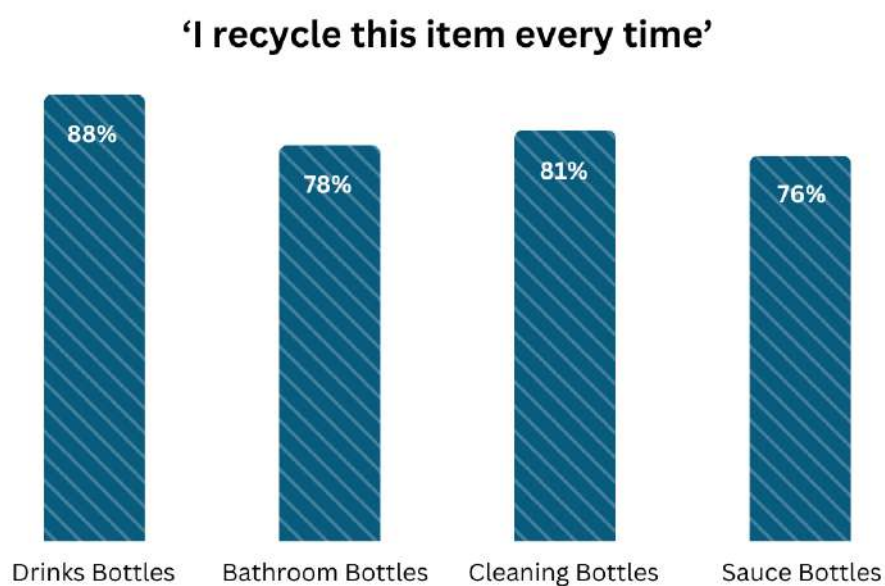


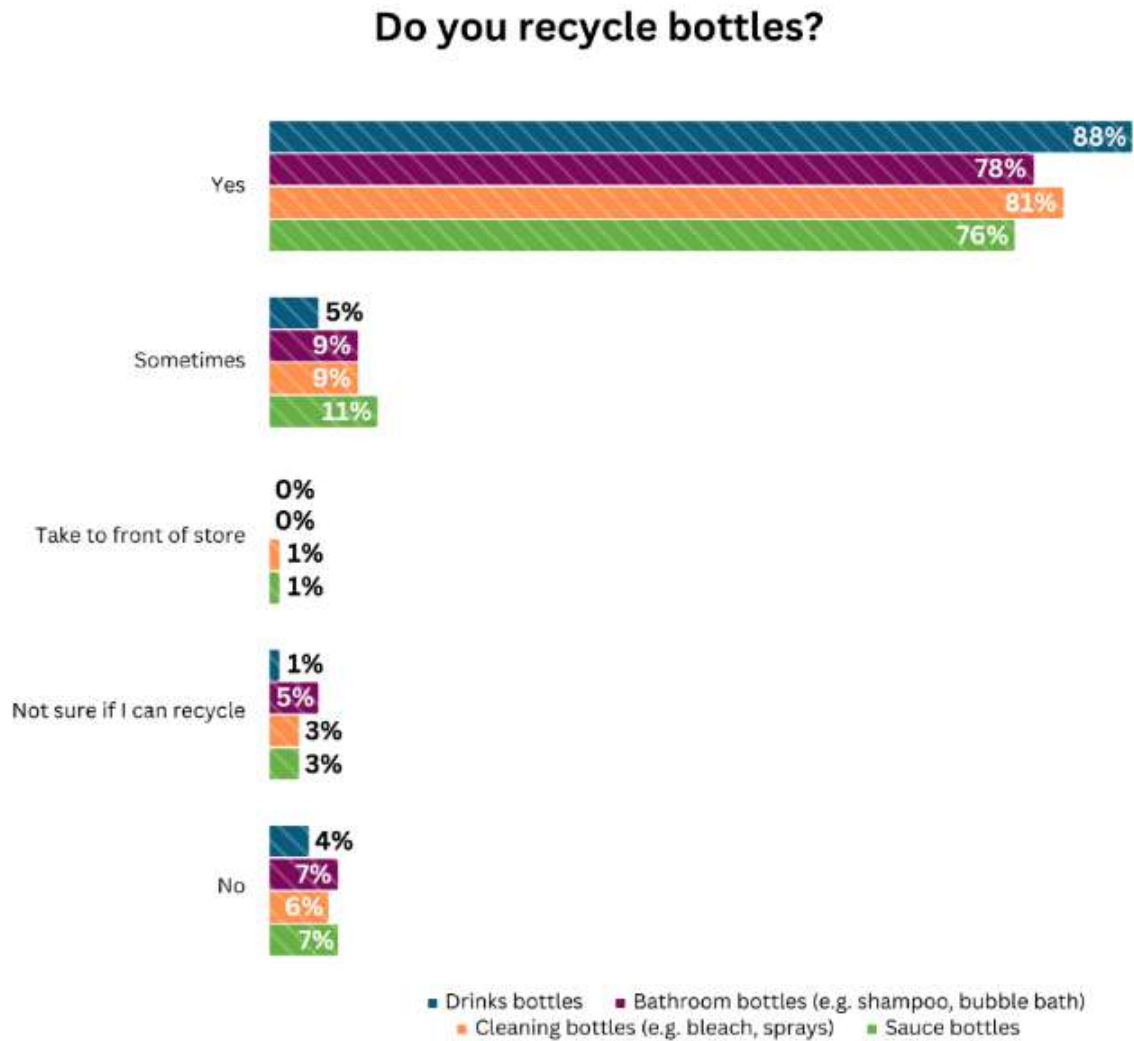
Figure 1: The proportion of UK respondents who answered each of the bottle questions saying they recycle every time.

Responses on other bottle types such as cleaning product bottles remain fairly stagnant at 81% (80% in 2021). Those citizens declaring to recycle sauce bottles every time dropped by 4% to 76% in this study.

NATIONAL RESPONSES, including County Durham – plastic bottles.

5% of citizens were unsure about whether bottles from the bathroom could be recycled. 11% were more likely to only recycle some of their sauce bottles and 7% of citizens declared that they do not recycle sauce or bathroom bottles.

Figure 2: UK resident declared recycling behaviours.



COUNTY DURHAM RESPONSES – Plastic Bottles.

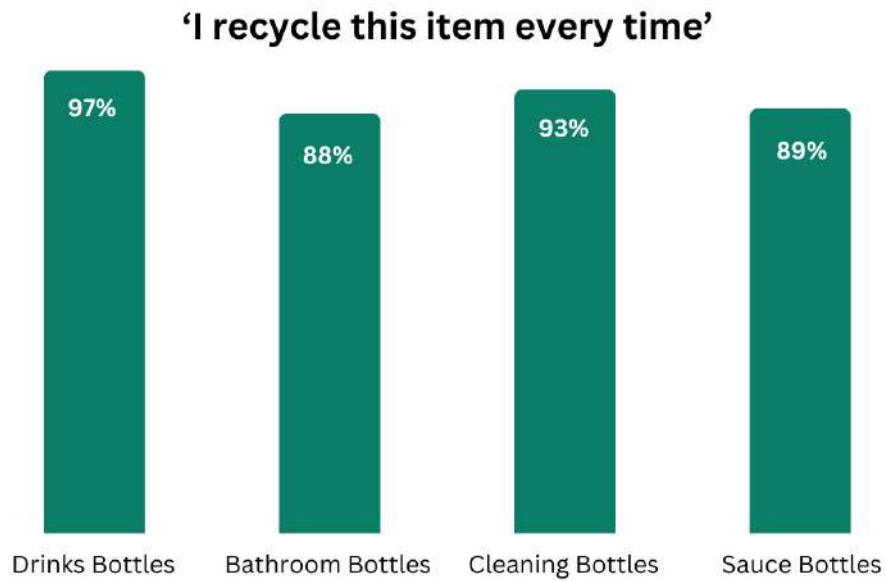
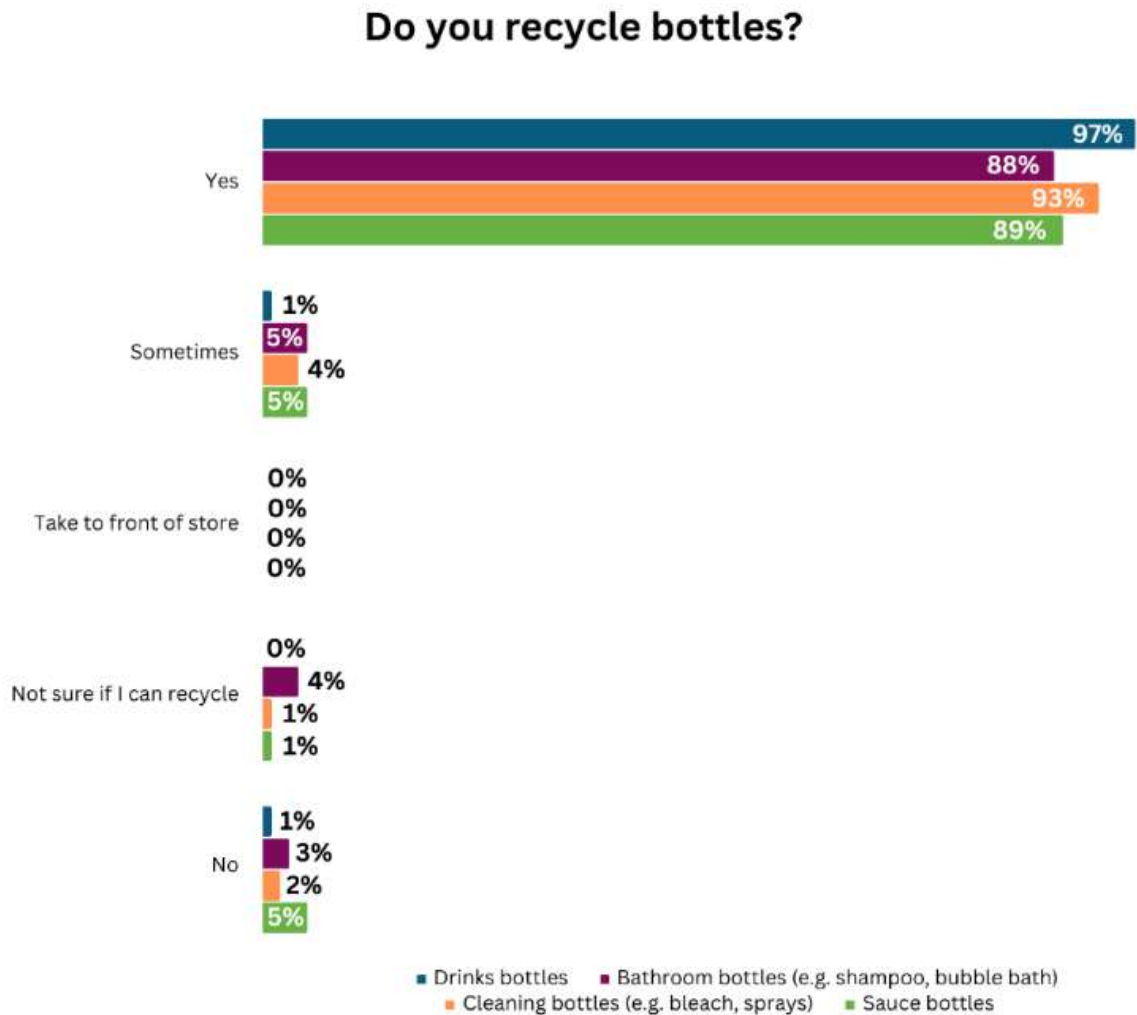


Figure 3: The proportion of County Durham respondents who answered each of the bottle questions saying they recycle every time.

The County Durham data shows considerable upshift in those residents declaring they recycle bottles every time. **97%** of County Durham residents declared that they recycle drinks bottles every time an **increase of 9%**. With 12% more residents claiming they recycle cleaning bottles every time against the rest of the UK at 81%.

COUNTY DURHAM RESPONSES – Plastic Bottles

Figure 4: County Durham residents declared recycling behaviours.



County Durham residents were also less confused with only 1% declaring that they were not sure if drinks bottles could be recycled and only 1% declaring that they did not recycle at all. 5% of respondents said they only recycled sauce bottles ‘sometimes’ reflecting the reluctance to wash out the bottles.



Pots, Tubs and Trays (PTT)

Key Comparisons

88% of Local Authorities in the UK currently collect Pots, Tubs, and Trays (PTT) at kerbside, therefore respondents in an area where there is no service provision will be influenced by this fact. County Durham residents are able to recycle pots, tubs, and trays in their mixed dry recycling with the exception of black plastic.

The overall national collection rate for plastic pots, tubs, and trays according to the RECOUP UK Household Plastics Packaging Collection Survey 2023 is **39%**. Whilst this represents a positive upshift for pot, tub, and tray recycling there remains a gap between declared and actual behaviours. Respondents were asked both nationally and regionally if they recycled pots, tubs, fruit and



vegetable trays and trays that had previously contained raw meat. Responses to face-to-face surveys indicate that whilst individuals want to do the right thing, at the point of disposal individuals will question if they have indeed got it right. In the case of fresh meat trays concerns with regard to kitchen

contamination may over-ride any on-the-pack recycling instructions. Citizens are also not sure what to do with film lids and absorbent layers.

NATIONAL RESPONSES, including County Durham for pots, tubs, and trays.

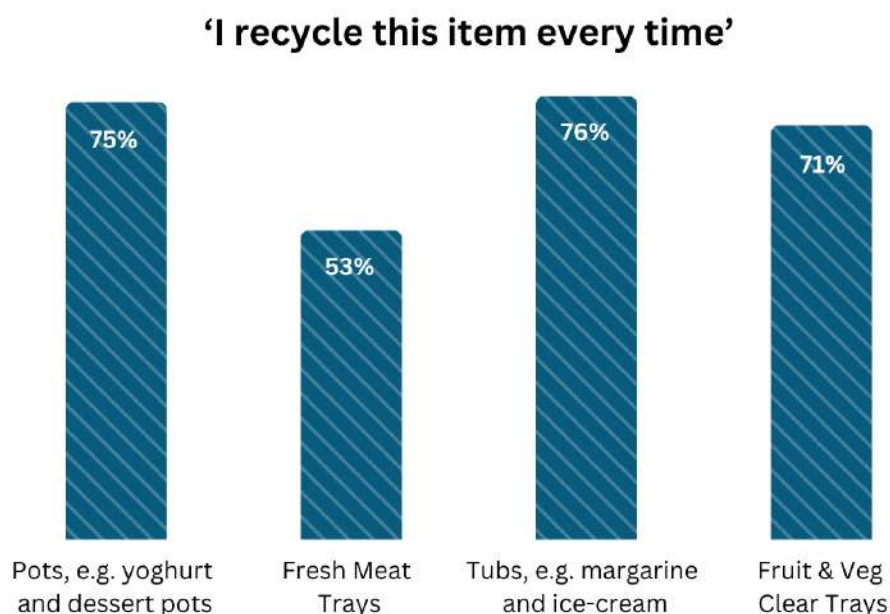


Figure 5: National recycling responses of people declaring they recycle pots, tubs and trays every time.

There is a 9% drop in residents declaring they recycle fresh meat trays every time (this was 62% in 2021, 2023 shows 53%). Those declaring they recycle yoghurt pots every time has risen by 5% to 75%. More people claim to recycle margarine and ice-cream tubs every time at 76% than fruit and veg trays at 71%.

NATIONAL RESPONSES, including County Durham for pots, tubs, and trays.

Do you recycle the following items of plastic packaging?

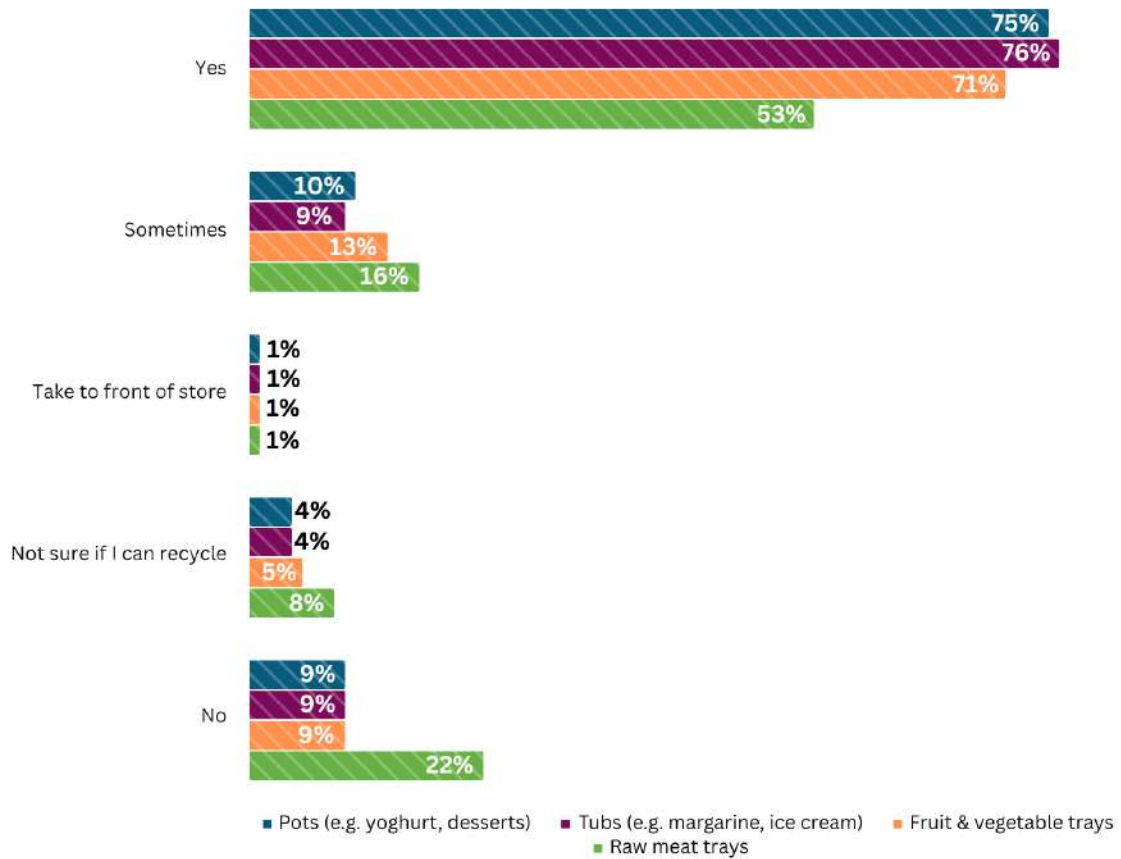


Figure 6: National recycling behaviours with regard to the recycling of pots, tubs, and trays.

Meat trays had the highest responses to only recycling sometimes at 16% and never recycling at 22%.

COUNTY DURHAM RESPONSES – pots, tubs, and trays.

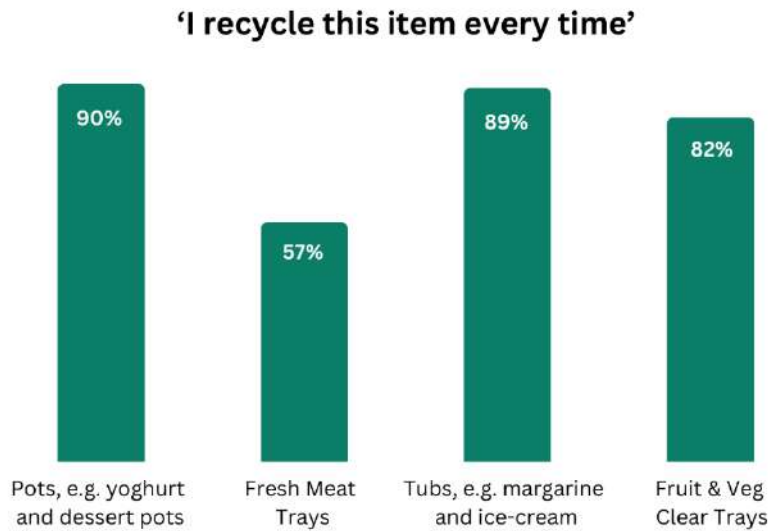


Figure 7: Durham responses of people declaring they recycle pots, tubs, and trays every time.

90% of respondents claimed to recycle yoghurt pots every time 15% higher than the national data. Again, the recycling of meat trays every time has the lowest number of recycle every time responses at 57%.

Do you recycle the following items of plastic packaging?

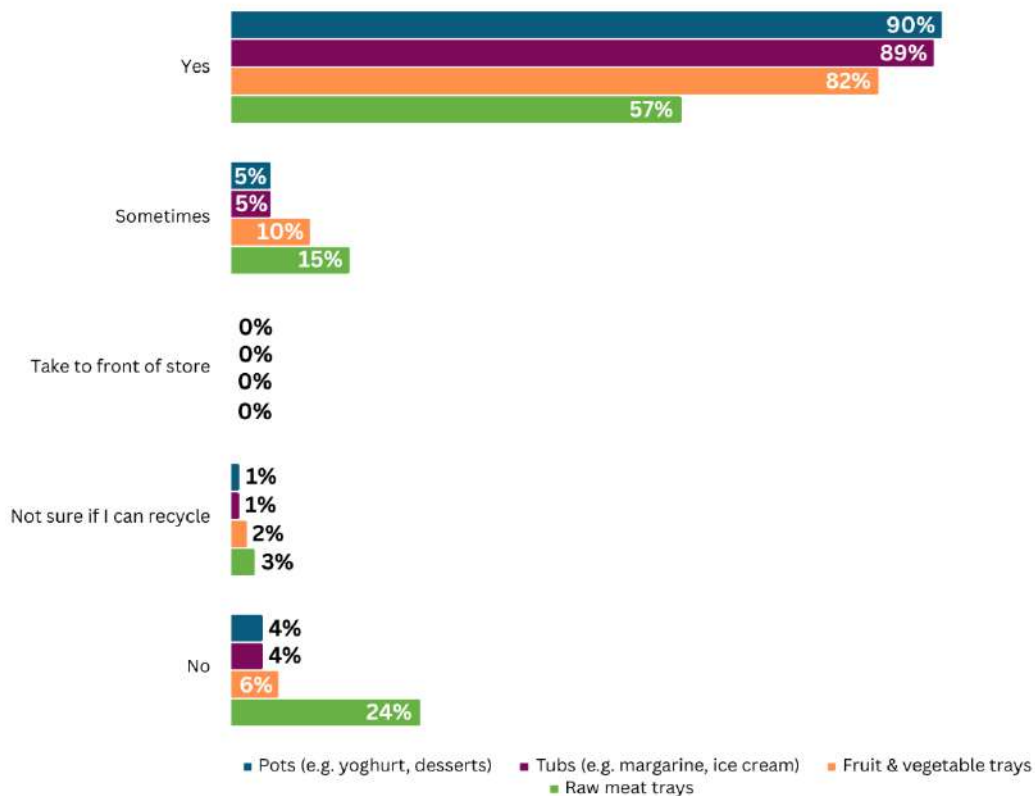


Figure 8: County Durham recycling behaviours with regard to the recycling of pots, tubs, and trays.

Both national and County Durham responses reflect that citizens are recycling less meat trays than any other tray format and at the same time respond positively to recycling yoghurt pots. In both sets of data individuals claim to be recycling less fruit and veg trays than margarine and ice-cream tubs.

Plastic Bags and Wrappings (Films & Flexibles)

Key Comparisons

Only 12%¹³ of Local Authorities in the UK now collect films and flexibles kerbside, which naturally influences the responses here. The survey follows WRAP and Pledge2Recycle Plastics terminology in terms of referencing what the industry calls film and flexible plastics, using the term 'plastic bags and wrappings'. When asked about plastic bags & wrapping in general, the largest proportion of respondents said they don't recycle due to a lack of kerbside collections.

NATIONAL RESPONSES, including County Durham – plastic bags and wrappings.

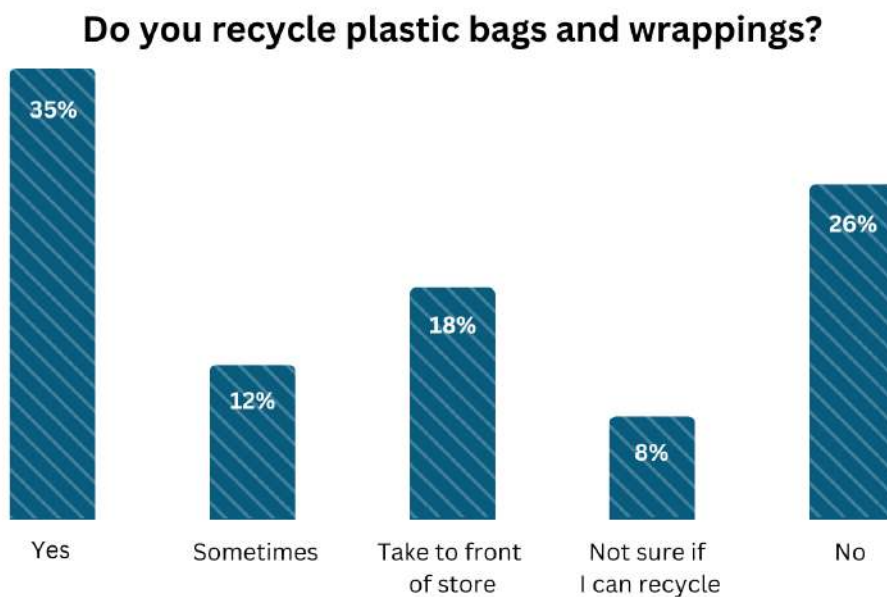


Figure 9: National response in relation to question, 'Do you recycle plastic bags and .wrappings?'

Nationally 35% of survey respondents said they recycle plastic bags and wrappings with 26% giving a clear 'no' in response to the question. 12% of responses display an uncertain behaviour trait declaring that they only recycle sometimes whilst 18% declare that they recycle via front of store provisions. This is an upshift of 9% since 2021.

There is a drop in the number of respondents saying they are confused about whether plastic bags or wrappings can be recycled down to 8% nationally from 11% in 2021. However, 12% declared that they only sometimes recycle, and this is not clear whether this is due to convenience or confusion.

¹³ RECOUP UK Household Plastics Packaging Collection Survey 2023

COUNTY DURHAM RESPONSES – plastic bags and wrappings

Do you recycle plastic bags and wrappings?

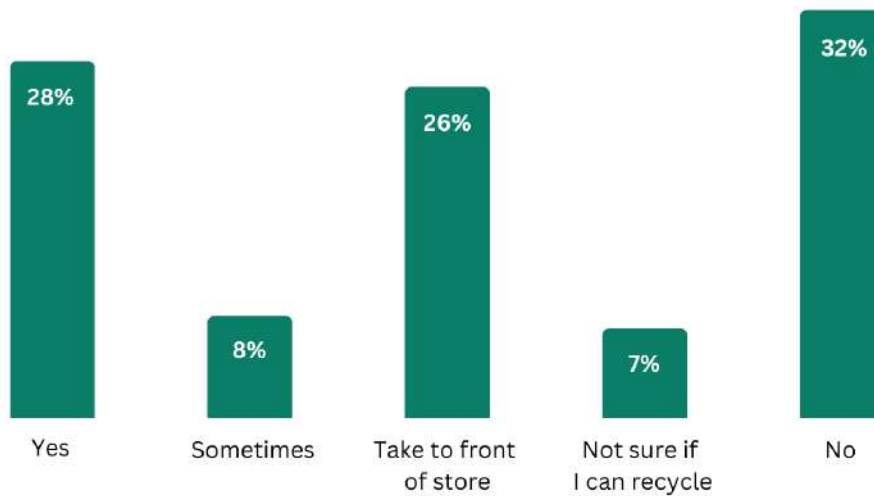
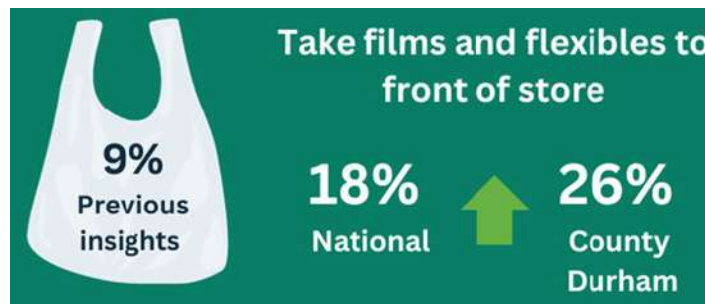


Figure 10: County Durham recycling behaviours with regard to the recycling of plastic bags and wrappings.

The County Durham responses show a marked increase in the number of individuals who declare they take plastic bags and wrappings to front of store provisions at **26% an increase of 8%** on the national data. 28% said yes, they recycle every time at home, 7% lower than national data which reflects the fact that the local authority does not collect kerbside. County Durham residents also declare to being less confused about whether the bags and wrappings are recyclable and only 8% of respondents say that they 'sometimes' recycle.



Films and Flexibles RECOUP UK Household Plastics Collection Survey 2023 – Context

The RECOUP UK Household Plastics Packaging Collection Survey 2023 found that the collection rate for plastic films in 2022 was 12%. However, the number of people saying they recycle plastic bags and wrappings kerbside remains higher than we would expect as this is more likely to be a non-target item.

The County Durham responses reflect the fact that plastic bags and wrappings (films and flexibles) are not collected kerbside. And there are indications that knowledge of where to take plastic bags and wrappings is increasing in the County with 26% of respondents saying they would take to front of store whereas this drops to 18% nationally.

Reasons Why People Say They Do Not Recycle

Respondents who said they did not recycle were asked to further clarify why and this was primarily due to confusion with most citizens stating that they were confused about whether an item could be recycled as the main reason. Secondly, respondents said that they normally recycle but miss a few items. Citizens both nationally and in County Durham ranked the fact that 'food remains on the item - I don't want to rinse it' as the third most likely reason as to why they do not recycle an item of plastic packaging.

NATIONAL RESPONSES, including County Durham – On why people do not recycle an item.

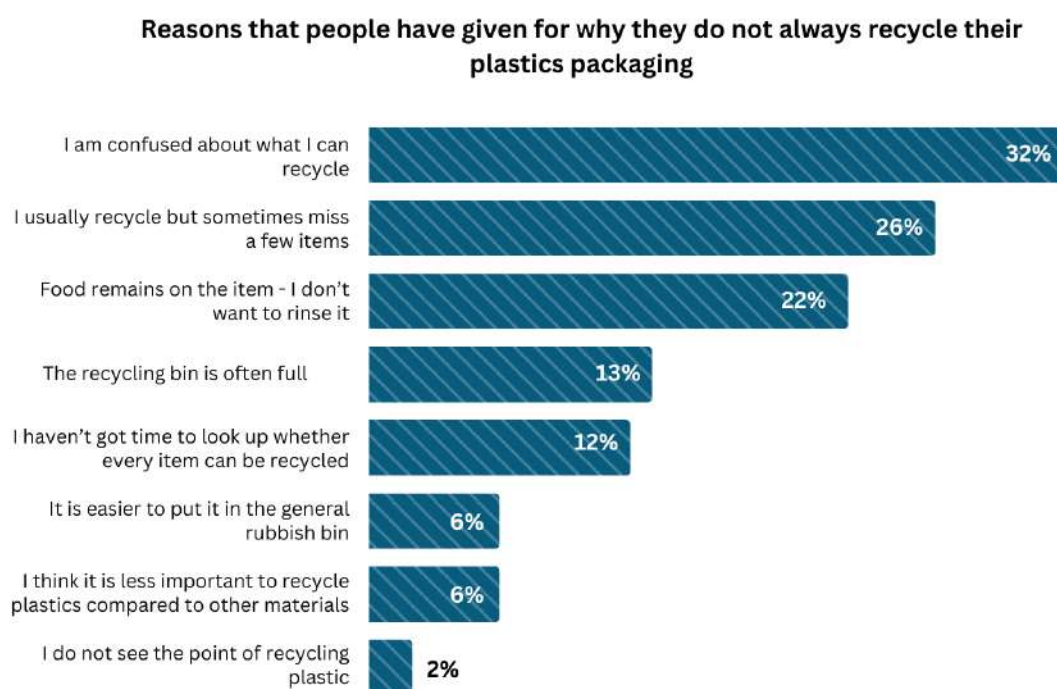


Figure 11: National responses to reasons why people do not recycle.

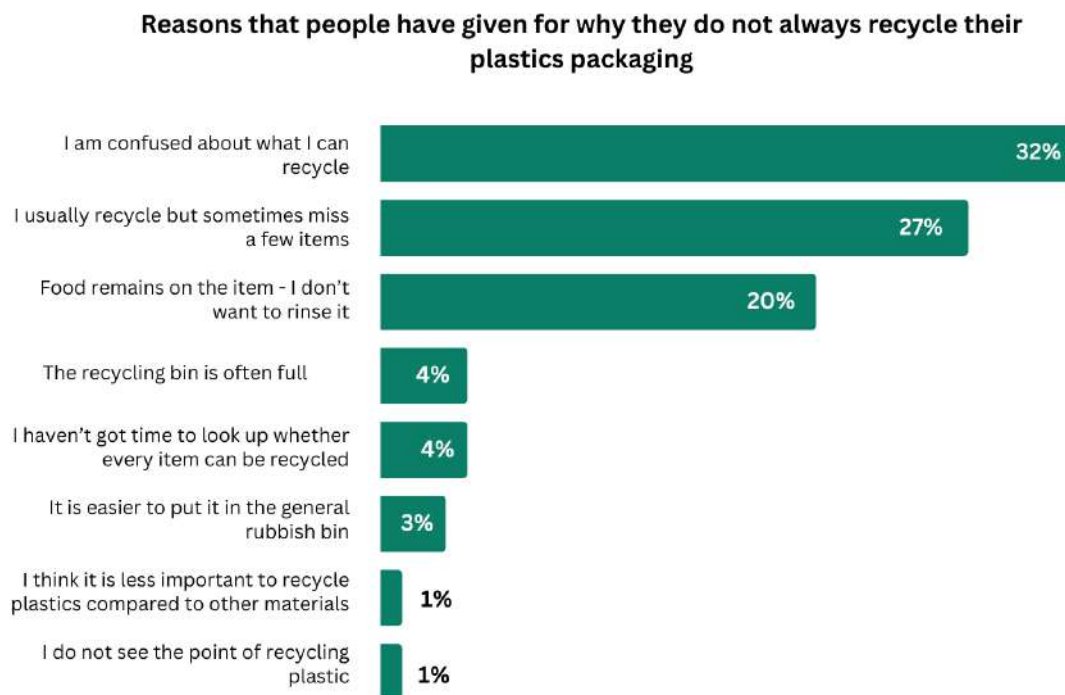
Nationally and in County Durham 32% of respondents said they were confused about what they could recycle.

26% of respondents said they sometimes miss a few items and 22% said that if food remains on the items, they don't want to rinse it, so don't recycle.



COUNTY DURHAM RESPONSES – On why people do not recycle an item.

Figure 12: County Durham responses to reasons why people do not recycle.



27% of County Durham respondents declared that they usually recycle but sometimes miss a few items and 20% said they don't recycle if the item is dirty.

Nationally 13% of respondents said they do not recycle when the recycling bin is full. For County Durham this dropped to 4%. County Durham have a separate plastic box for glass, all other recyclables are in a wheelie bin with fortnightly collections.

Less respondents said they hadn't the time to look up whether an item can be recycled with this being 12% nationally and 4% from County Durham respondents.

Environmental Terminology

Respondents were asked which of the following terms they had heard of;

- Net Zero
- Circular economy
- Carbon Offsetting
- Non-mechanical recycling
- Chemical recycling
- Deposit Return Scheme

Over 70% of those who completed the survey said they had heard of carbon offsetting. In the face-to-face setting they also went on to say when and in the main related it to travel and carbon offsetting of air travel. Just over 50% of people had heard of the term Deposit Return Scheme and

in face-to-face settings for the older age group they were able to relate this to glass bottle deposits and felt it was a move forward. Many individuals are used to schemes of this type on holiday.

NATIONAL RESPONSES, including County Durham – On which environmental terminology people have heard of.

Which of these terms have you heard of?

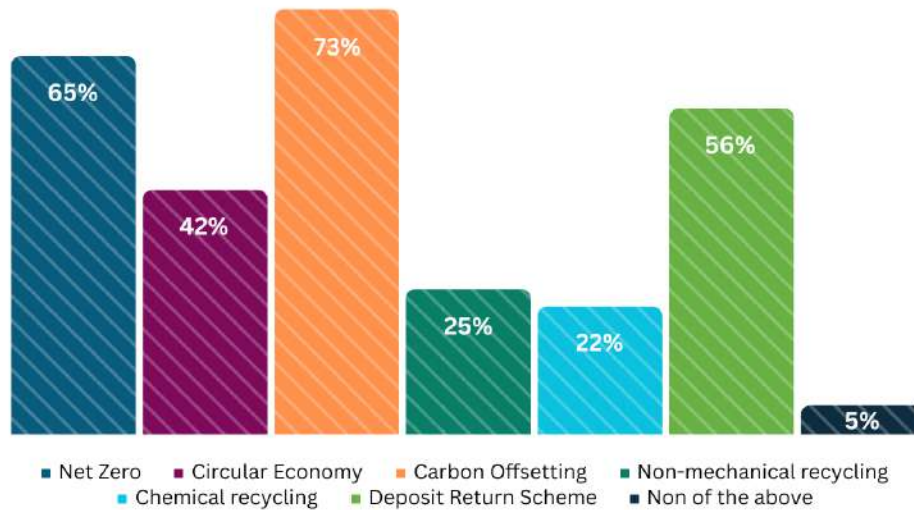


Figure 13: National responses to which environmental terminology respondents had heard of.

Almost 80% of respondents said they had heard of Net Zero in County Durham. Almost 10% more respondents had heard of carbon offsetting in County Durham than the UK average.

COUNTY DURHAM RESPONSES – On which environmental terminology people have heard of.

Which of these terms have you heard of?

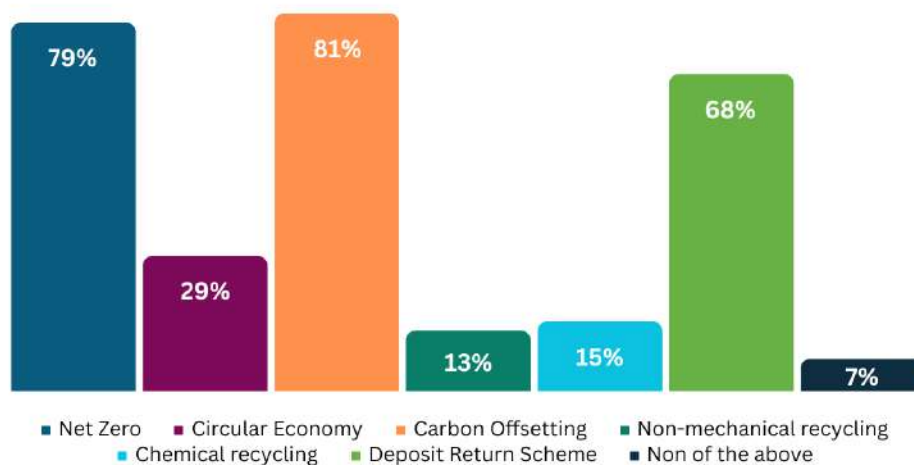


Figure 14: County Durham responses to which environmental terminology respondents had heard of.

Only 5% of respondents nationally and 7% in Durham said that they had not heard of any of the terminology.

In face-to-face questionnaires those that had not heard of non-mechanical or chemical recycling asked for it to be explained. Of those that declared they had heard of chemical recycling they said that they thought this was taking chemical waste to a household waste recycling centre to be disposed of such as used oil.

Attitudes to Deposit Return Schemes

All respondents were asked if they had to pay a token amount or deposit on plastic drinks bottles or aluminium drinks cans, how would they prefer to receive that deposit back?

NATIONAL RESPONSES, including County Durham – Deposit Return Schemes

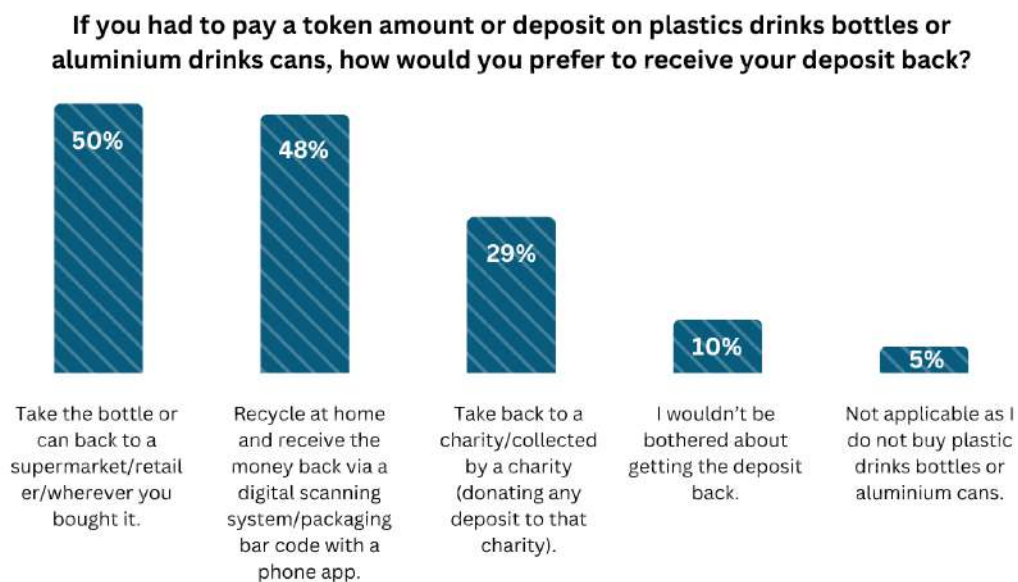


Figure 15: National responses to how respondents would wish to receive back a deposit on drinks cans or plastics bottles paid under the deposit return scheme.

Respondents were allowed to make more than one choice for how they would prefer to receive any deposit back. There is a clear split almost 50/50 between taking the bottle/can back to store for a refund or scanning the pack at home via a smartphone app. However, some respondents were keen to see that there was the possibility of charities being able to benefit from such schemes and recoup the deposits, particularly if this was more convenient than taking back to store.

COUNTY DURHAM RESPONSES – Deposit Return Schemes

If you had to pay a token amount or deposit on plastics drinks bottles or aluminium drinks cans, how would you prefer to receive your deposit back?

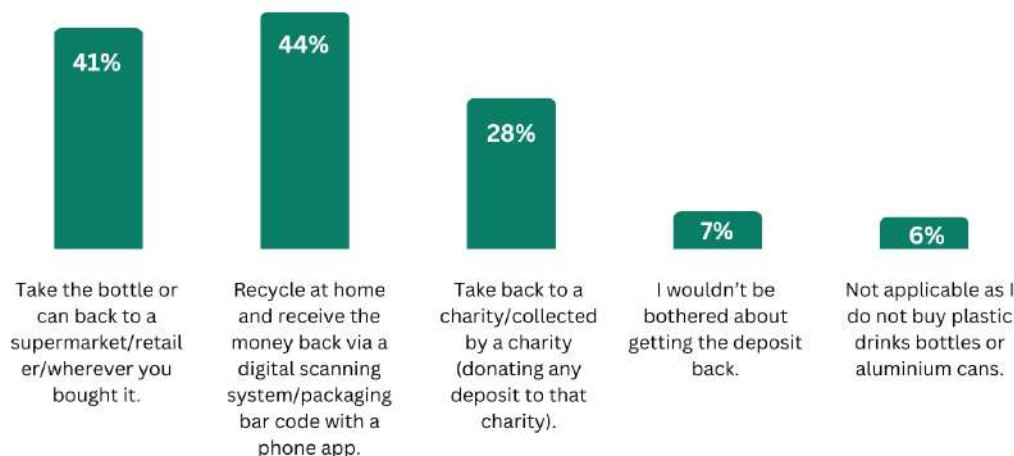


Figure 16: County Durham responses to how respondents would wish to receive back a deposit on drinks cans or plastics bottles paid under the deposit return scheme.

Slightly less people were happy to take the plastic bottles and cans back to a retailer or supermarket in County Durham which could have been influenced by the higher percentage of female responses and the higher age range. A lower percentage of respondents in County Durham were not bothered about getting the money back and likewise 1% fewer people said they would be happy for the deposit to go to charity which may be due to the lower level of disposal income in the County compared to the UK average¹⁴.

Face-to-face respondents did point out that they would want to take the bottle back to the store where they normally shop and hoped the provisions for this service would not be limited to only certain locations. Convenience being the key.

Comparing County Durham and national data preferences in relation to gender. Nationally, 25–44-year-old females would prefer to take back to store over return from home (app based), whereas County Durham females within the same age group prefer return from home (app based) to return to store.

Nationally, 35–44-year-old males would prefer to take back to store over return from home (app based), whereas County Durham males within the same age group prefer return from home (app based) to return to store.

Nationally, 65-year-old and over males have a stronger tendency to opt for return from home (app based) (40%) when compared to the County Durham sample (16%). All other deposit return options mirror the national average for the male 65+ sample.

¹⁴ County Durham - Annual disposable household income of £16,542pp (-21.6 per cent lower than the UK average) and productivity of £29.80 per hour worked (-15 per cent lower than UK average) ONS May 2021.

Looking at the National data a higher proportion of males than females would not be bothered about getting the deposit back. This was evident across most age groups, with 33% for under 18s (only 3 respondents) and 25% for 18–24-year-olds (48 respondents).

The option of giving the deposit to charity was relatively strong across all well represented age groups for males, ranging from just over 1 in 4 (26%) for 45–54-year-olds to more than 1 in 3 (35%) for 25-34-year-olds.

Recycling Guidance

It is important that if we are to communicate to citizens effectively that we understand where they get their information from and ensure that these points of reference are accurate and consistent thus enabling individuals to be confident in their recycling behaviours and driving sustained behavioural change. Respondents were therefore asked ‘Where do you get your information about whether an item of plastics packaging can be recycled in your household recycling collection?’

NATIONAL RESPONSES, including County Durham – to question on where do you get your recycling information from.

Respondents were allowed to make more than one choice in terms of where they get their recycling information from as this is normally a combination of information points.

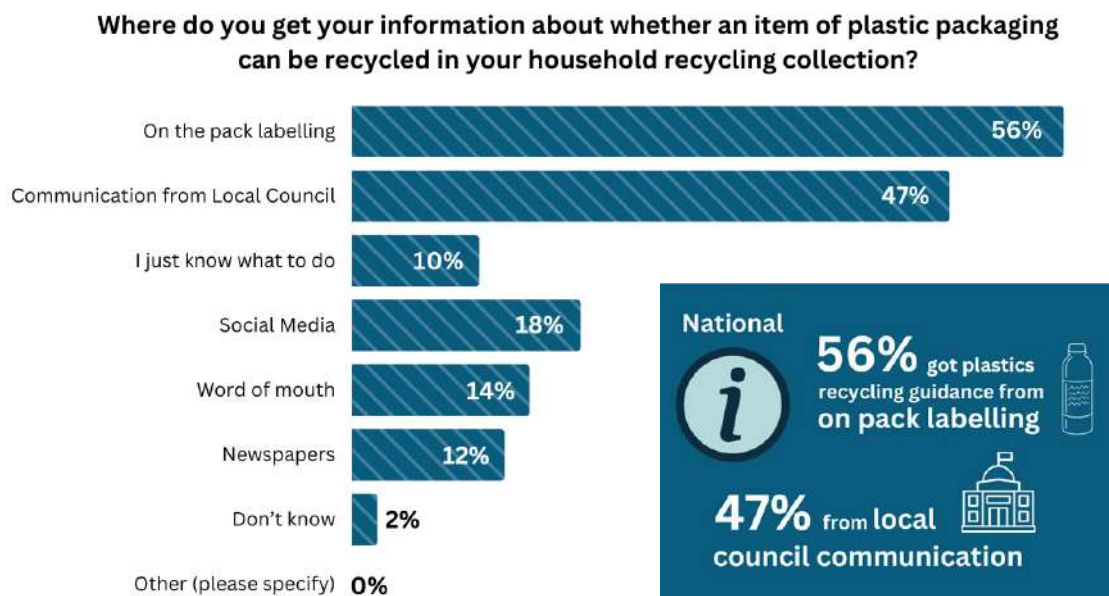


Figure 17: National responses to where respondents get their recycling information from.

The two options that stand out as most favoured reference points for citizens on recycling communications are on the pack labelling and local council communications. It should be noted that this is any labelling on the pack that instructs on recycling this is not necessarily the On-the-Pack Recycling Label.

County Durham data follows similar response levels to that of the national data set. Again, on the pack labelling scores highest which is closely followed by communication from the local council.

County Durham responses – to question on where do you get your recycling information from.

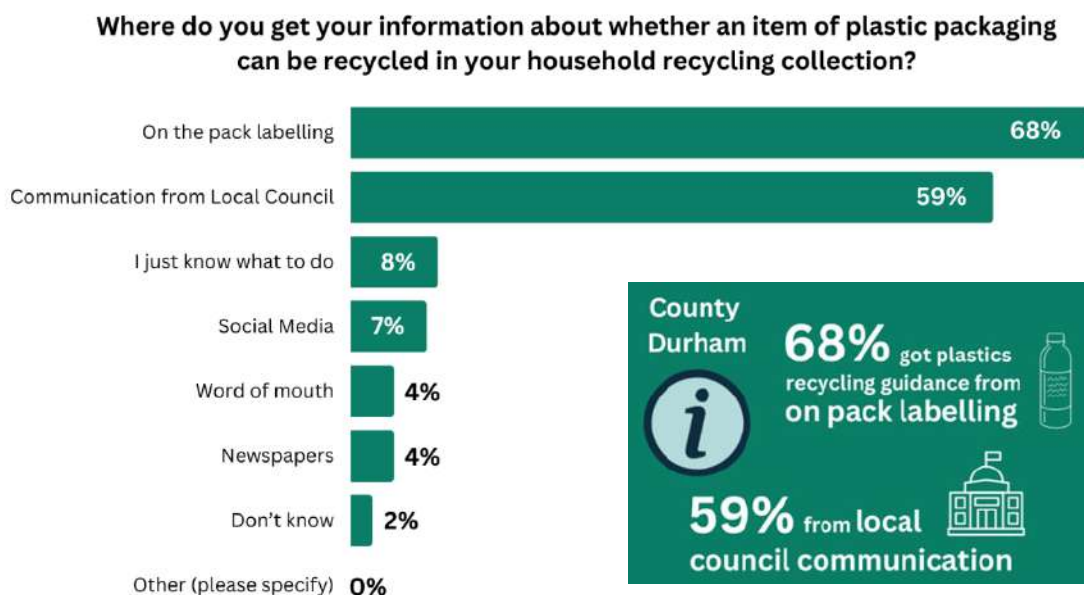


Figure 18: County Durham responses to where respondents get their recycling information from.

This highlights the importance of synergy and consistency across these two communication streams. Face-to-face discussions allowed for discussions with individuals pointing out that sometimes depending on pack instructions they cross check with the local authority instructions but sometimes it remains unclear. Discussions centred around packs where the words ‘recyclable’ may be printed such as toothpaste tubes, but they are not accepted kerbside.

Not all packs with recyclable instructions are part of the On-the-Pack Recycling Label (OPRL).¹⁵



Figure 19: Example of OPRL labelling containing ‘recycle’ instructions.



Figure 20: Example of toothpaste tube

RECOUP’s previous case study highlights the issues relating to capture, sorting, and recycling of toothpaste tubes in a Recyclability by Design 2020 Case Study of Beauty and Personal Care Products¹⁶.

¹⁵ www.oprl.org.uk

¹⁶ [CASE STUDY BOOKLET - Beauty and Personal Care Case Studies UPDATED 29OCT2020 \(recoup.org\)](http://CASE STUDY BOOKLET - Beauty and Personal Care Case Studies UPDATED 29OCT2020 (recoup.org))

Response Data

Gender Profile of Respondents

Nationally the responses were 30% male and 65% female with the remaining 5% preferring not to answer. For Durham the female responses rose to 78% with only 20% male and 2% preferring not to answer.

Age Profile of Respondents

In the national responses the highest age category represented (at 23%) was the 65+ age category. Nationally 42% of respondents were under the age of 45 and 58% over.

National Respondents Age Range

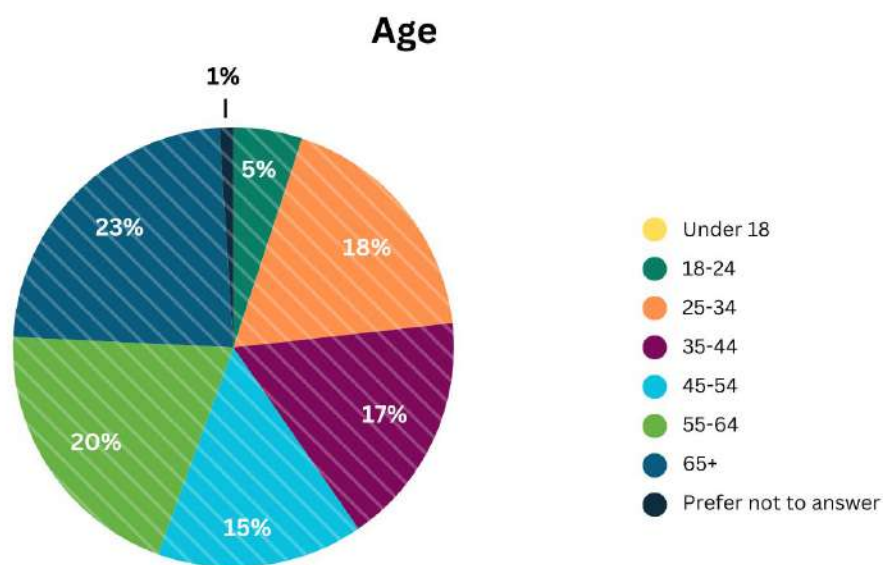


Figure 21: National respondents age range including County Durham.

23% of all respondents were over the age of 65 and 20% in the 55 to 64 age bracket. Only 5% of respondents were under 25.

Nationally 40% of respondents were under the age of 45.

County Durham Respondents Age Range

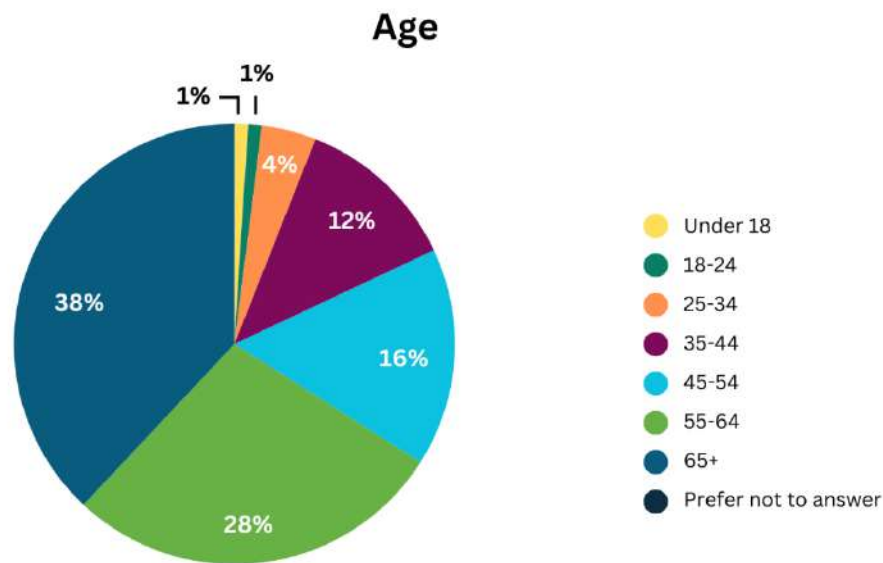


Figure 22: County Durham National respondents age range.

The highest response rate in Durham was in the 65+ age range at 38%. 72% of respondents were over age 45 with only 28% of respondents being 44 or under.

Conclusions

Declared and Actual Behaviours Inconsistencies.

If we compare claimed recycling behaviours against UK plastics recycling collection rates, it is clear a disparity remains between claimed and actual behaviours.

The RECOUP UK Household Plastics Packaging Survey 2023 indicates a kerbside collection rate of plastic bottles of 63% (same as 2022 figures) and pots, tubs, and tray rate of 39% (an increase of 1% on 2022 figures), 7% for films and flexibles (plastic bags and wrappings). Yet citizens claiming to recycle every time are considerably higher, one could argue that this survey may have only reached those who are already keen recyclers, or that citizens have an optimistic view of their recycling habits.

Responses in Relation to Service Provision

There was a disproportionate level of responses from citizens saying that they recycle plastic bags and wrappings every time (35% - UK average), when only 12% of UK local authorities collect kerbside. This dropped to 28% for County Durham residents alone, perhaps indicating a greater awareness of the fact that this type of plastic cannot be recycled kerbside.

The trend nationally, worryingly indicates a drop off in those recycling plastic bottles despite a 100% service provision rate by local authorities, yet an increase in those declaring they recycle pots, tubs, and trays.

Communication Conflicts



As with RECOUP's Kent Understanding Plastics Live Lab report¹⁷ and RECOUP' Citizen Plastics Recycling Behaviours Insights Study 2021¹⁸ this piece of insights work indicates that citizens remain confused, with 32% of citizens both nationally and regionally stating that confusion over whether a pack was recyclable was the main reason why they did not recycle an item.

Citizens in face-to-face conversations expanded on their thought process when deciding if an item is recyclable in that they usually follow on-the-pack instructions but when this either

conflicts with their previous understanding they are then likely to follow through by checking their local authority website or communications. Unfortunately, if the two sets of communications do not match, confusion over which one to follow is even greater. This conflict can result in contamination or lost capture.

This final piece of the decision tree can also vary depending on other factors such as media information at the time, convenience, preparation requirements or bin capacity. This supports requests made to RECOUP in the 2019 Watch Me Think study¹⁹ to make recycling communications much simpler. If the media is shouting loud and clear 'black plastic isn't recyclable' then citizens are likely to follow that instruction even if it is a local authority target material.

In the absence of simple and concise communications that have national synergy, citizens information will continue to conflict. There remains no national plastic bottle messaging despite 100% kerbside collection coverage. Whilst there is a continued focus on the differences between kerbside arrangements and why authority A is different from authority B this adds fuel to the belief that a national message is out of reach. And, as a result, citizens do not have one single point of reference instead have many ways of obtaining recycling guidance but are often not sure of which instruction is correct. This insights survey highlighted that many citizens were indeed crosschecking information on the pack with that from the local authority however when this conflicts then citizens



¹⁷ www.recoup.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/recoup-report-kent-understanding-plastics-live-lab-final-

¹⁸ www.recoup.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/citizen-plastics-recycling-behaviours-insights-study-2021-final-020222-1643892961-2.pdf

¹⁹ RECOUP Research Study into Consumer Recycling Behaviours 2019

are left frustrated and confused. Over a third of citizens both nationally and regionally remain confused.

It is therefore crucial that local authority communications and on-pack labelling align.

Target List Conflicts

The aspirations of the eutopia of consistency in collections or Simpler Recycling can only be effective if it is matched with consistency in pack design and labelling. Whilst labelling on the pack and the ‘target/non-target’ materials for recycling via Local kerbside collections continue to conflict so will the citizens understanding and therefore confusion.

Examples discussed with citizens included toothpaste tubes where the packs may claim ‘recyclable’ and yet RECOUP are not aware of any UK Local Authority collecting kerbside. End markets are also not clear for this type of packaging.

The fall out over confusion of black plastic recyclability remains and whilst this packaging format is being phased out by many brands, the media headlines still resonate with citizens. In face-to-face discussions in County Durham, due to the fact that black is a non-target material in that area then citizens over think the instructions and question if other colours can be recycled.



Figure 23: Example of toothpaste tube containing advice to recycle.

As mentioned, that whilst citizens across all surveys overwhelmingly reported that they get their recycling knowledge firstly from the pack and secondly cross check with their local authority, conflicts between packs and local instructions not only risk increasing confusion but also risk increasing contamination.



The first test of ‘recyclability’ should be whether the pack forms part of UK local authority target listing. OPRL guidelines state that a pack should be collected by 75% or more local authorities kerbside to obtain the ‘recycle’ logo.

Mislabelling by pack manufacturers adds to citizen confusion as well as causing kerbside contamination. It could also be said that marking a pack ‘recyclable’ that is not collected kerbside is a form of green washing.

Figure 24: [Certified Greenwashing – Real Greenwash Kitemark - Terrafiniti](#)



Previous RECOUP insights work, and both the national and County Durham sets of data point to older citizens being more likely to say they recycle every time. However, this also highlights possible wish recycling²⁰ and therefore the possibility of unintended contamination.

Complex Packaging and Cleaning

Reluctance to clean a pack was a key consideration as to why a pack might not get recycled, with 26% nationally citing this as a reason why they might not recycle and 20% respondents in County Durham.

The easier it is to clean a pack and clearer the guidance on the pack such as what to do with lids could aid recycling. In face-to-face interviews, citizens commented that due to difficulties removing pack lids on some food packaging means it is easier to put the pack and the remaining contents into the general waste. Consideration to the cleaning and what is required to be done to a pack to make it more recyclable should be a key part of the design.

Recommendations/Further Work

Pack Claims in Conflict v Local Authority Target Material

Synergy is required between pack manufacturers/pack labelling and local authority target material lists. Unfortunately, despite advances in terms of pack designs this can take some time to filter through to local authority target listings.

The first test of 'recyclability' should be whether the pack forms part of UK local authority target listing. OPRL guidelines state that a pack should be collected by 75% or more local authorities kerbside to obtain the 'recycle' logo.

Mislabelling by pack manufacturers adds to citizen confusion as well as causing kerbside contamination.

Work conducted by RECOUP to encourage manufacturers to redesign packs to ensure capture, such as the move by plant pot manufacturers to move away from black plastic to other colours still has not resulted in plant pots (with the exception of black) being accepted on local authority target lists. Efforts should be made by the value chain to ensure that pack changes (if the pack can then be sorted and captured through existing systems) should be rewarded with a process that would enable 'target' listing by local authorities if the pack was compliant and a way found to navigate through local contract arrangements.

²⁰ Wish recycling – The disposal of consumer waste in the recycling bin in the hope that it is recycled
[Wishcycling - Wikipedia](#)

Claimed and Actual Behavioural Differences



There would appear to be a conflict between claimed and actual recycling behaviours with the RECOUP UK Household Plastics Packaging Collection Survey 2022²¹ where collection rates for plastics packaging were 63% for plastic bottles (78% for HDPE and 73% for PET), 38% for pots, tubs, and trays and 7% for films and flexibles.

The RECOUP UK Household Plastics Packaging Collection Survey 2023²² indicates a stagnation in bottle recycling rates with collection rates remaining at 63% and a slight increase in pots, tubs, and tray rates of 1% to 39%. Although the trend follows a similar pattern with plastic bottle recycling rates falling and pots, tub, and tray rates increasing, there remains a disparity between claimed and actual behaviours.

It may be that the insights data reflects desired rather than actual behaviours. In County Durham the household leaflet and communications will be fresh in resident minds and therefore there is a strong desire to recycle more. A similar impact was seen in 2021 with the work RECOUP undertook in Kent under the Kent Understanding Plastics 'Live Lab' project where responses in 2021 were higher than the national average.

The Best Practice Guide for UK Plastics Recycling Communications²³ completed on the delivery of the



Kent Understanding Plastics 'Live Lab' project highlighted the results of Kent survey responses against the UK averages. Here 89% of Kent residents declared they recycle bathroom bottles every time (an increase of 2% on the national average), cleaning bottles at 85% (+3% on the national average), and 86% for sauce bottles (+2% on rest of the UK).

The start of behaviour change is through raising awareness and increasing the willingness and drive to want to recycle more

and recycle right. For example, most of adults know you should eat 5 portions of fruit and veg a day however 77% of adults eat less than the recommended amount of veg a day.²⁴ It is only through regular and ongoing conversations and information to citizens that the desire to recycle can be driven to sustained behaviour change.

Following through with sustained messaging not just one-off projects can help turn desired behaviours into ongoing new behaviours.

²¹ [uk-household-plastic-packaging-collection-survey-2022-full-report-5123-1672931733.pdf](https://www.recoup.org/uk-household-plastic-packaging-collection-survey-2022-full-report-5123-1672931733.pdf) (recoup.org)

²² www.recoup.org/resources/reports

²³ www.recoup.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/best-practice-guide-to-uk-plastics-recycling-communications-04082022-1659690851-1.pdf

²⁴ [Peas-Please-Veg-Facts-2021-Mobile-Friendly.pdf](https://www.foodfoundation.org.uk/Peas-Please-Veg-Facts-2021-Mobile-Friendly.pdf) (foodfoundation.org.uk)

Plastics Recycling Messaging

Despite the fact that the UK collects plastic bottles across all UK local authorities there is still no single plastic bottle message agreed and supported by the whole value chain. There is no one national message or call to action that can be utilised to gain traction and support across the UK.

The challenge is how can plastic bottle recycling messaging be clear, simple, and supported by all authorities. Other than disparities on bin colour and frequency of collection the message to empty, squash and replace the lid could be widely accepted and used to reduce confusion nationally.

With 88% of local authorities now collecting pots, tubs, and trays kerbside there are many similarities that mean synergy on messaging could be possible if the value chain and local authorities concentrated on key easy wins such as encouraging citizens to recycle, clean, dry, and loose.

Whilst citizens cite confusion on what can and cannot be recycled as a prime reason why they might not do so, now is the time for the value chain to agree a set of clear unambiguous guidelines for plastics packaging.

It is important that the sector is seen to agree with recycling claims and recycling advice as this also increases and improves confidence of citizens that recycling claims are truthful and they can recycle with confidence. So often brands want to do things differently for market share differentiation but this does not help reduce citizen confusion nor drive recycling rates.

Could the plastics recycling value chain come together to voluntarily agree and a national call to action for plastic bottle and pots, tubs and tray recycling and more importantly could the sector agree how such a campaign be delivered and funded without waiting for Extended Producer Responsibility and Deposit Return Schemes to impact at kerbside.

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