

PE1636/F

Vegware submission of 2 May 2017

Vegware welcomes debate and is delighted to see the issue of recycling taking such a major platform. We would however like to see more leadership from government to create a roadmap to maximum recycling. We have no doubt manufacturers would respond to this with the innovation and flair that exists in the industry.

Vegware has known for a long time that conventional coffee cups are almost impossible to recycle. Unfortunately, the same goes for almost all conventional food packaging. Most conventional food packaging is made of a mix of materials – for example, cardboard coffee cups with a plastic lining, or card sandwich wedges with a plastic film. Separately, plastic and card are easy to recycle. But combined, the card contaminates the plastics recycling and the plastic contaminates the card recycling. Add in the inevitable food residues, and the result is a major recycling problem.

Compostable packaging offers a real, working solution. Vegware is made from plants, not plastic, and it's designed to be recycled with food waste; there's no need to clean, sort or separate any of it. With Vegware's compostable cups, a plant-based lining replaces plastic.

The entire package (complete with the compostable lid, stirrer, compostable sugar stick and any food residues) is perfect for food waste recycling – and we have compostability certification and real-life trials to prove it. Instead of adding to the UK's growing landfill problem or being incinerated, recycling with food waste can create nutrient rich compost, bio methane to heat homes or even be converted into electricity.

This is a real and existing solution already in use across Scotland and the UK. Our focus is foodservice where compostable packaging is the right solution. Other types of packaging need to be treated differently and we must recognise this as we devise the best way forward for each waste category.

The current debate raises many valid and relevant points around the environmental contribution of effective packaging, for example in preventing food waste in the supply chain.

There are also some objections to compostable packaging which are often raised. We address three of the most common below.

Objection 1: Compostables could contaminate plastic recycling

This is correct. Any recycling stream can be contaminated if waste is not managed effectively. Smart product labelling and well thought-out bin signage is essential. Vegware has shown that clear signage and effective customer engagement can substantially reduce contamination. An independent study at the University of Strathclyde found that our bin signage – which uses pictures – reduced contamination by 42%.

It's our view that, managed properly, compostable foodservice packaging can reduce contamination. This holds true for both food waste recycling where plastic is an issue

and in paper recycling where conventional paper cups with plastic linings cause contamination.

Objection 2: Does compostable packaging release methane in landfill?

A concern is often raised that if biodegradable packaging ends up in landfill, it breaks down and releases methane, a powerful greenhouse gas. While the concern is valid, this is a somewhat spurious argument because nothing breaks down in landfill, including compostable packaging. Unlike an open tip, a landfill site is lined with plastic or clay. Waste is compacted and covered with topsoil to provide an oxygen-starved and dry environment. This lack of degradation prevents harmful leachate seeping into groundwater.

To illustrate, excavations of landfills in North America have found newspapers from 40 years ago that are still readable. Regardless, our aim is to solve a downstream recycling issue and Vegware works to divert our products from landfill.

Objection 3: Littering

Some litter groups are concerned that the attitude of, “This product is compostable and will break down,” will lead to even more litter being thrown from the car window, because of users’ belief that it does not matter as it will break down and return harmlessly to nature.”

Litter groups and government have done a great job of reducing littering in the UK. Development of new waste management solutions should not stall out of concern for the behaviour of a small minority. This littering concern does not fit our experience as we work with catering sites to switch them to compostable foodservice packaging. In fact, we find the opposite – when bins are well-signed and in the right place, they’re very effective at keeping litter off the ground and increasing public engagement.

Thought leadership

The Ellen MacArthur foundation is a think-tank that works with business, government and academia to build a framework for an economy that is restorative and regenerative by design. Their three-year project titled ‘The New Plastics Economy’ was referenced in the debate but omitted from the government’s response. The interim report was presented in January 2017 and sets out a practical vision which tackles all of the issues head on.

The researchers and technical experts behind the report reached the conclusion that compostable packaging provides the only genuine solution to zero-to-landfill in foodservice.

This is exactly what we do at Vegware and is why our Environmental team works closely with the waste sector to match our customers up with viable recycling routes for mixed food and compostable packaging waste.

We would welcome the opportunity to collaborate with industry and the Scottish government on large scale initiatives.