



PAPER CUP

Recovery & Recycling Group

FAQs

Q Are paper cups recyclable?

Yes, paper cups are technically recyclable - the paper fibres contained within a paper cup can be recycled if the cups end up at a reprocessing facility with the appropriate technical capability to separate the paper from the PE coating. However, many of the paper mills in the UK currently view paper cups as challenging to recycle due to the processing time required to separate the paper fibre from the plastic coating. Some fibre is freed from the lining during these processes and it is this fibre that is recycled. There are a small number of specialist facilities in the UK that are able to maximise the release of paper fibres from coated board, such as paper cups. Therefore, whether or not a paper cup is recycled, is currently heavily dependent on which reprocessing facility it reaches.

Q What is the context in terms of volumes of waste?

Paper coffee cups make up just 0.7% of total paper packaging waste¹ in the UK.

If you look at the total volumes of household waste in the UK, coffee cups make up 0.1% of that waste².

Q Why are paper cups so difficult to recycle?

To recycle a paper cup, the necessary polyethylene plastic (PE) coating must be separated from the paper fibre. There are currently limited specialist facilities in the UK able to recycle PE-coated paper board.

Q How many paper cups are used in the UK each year?

Based on the number of outlets serving coffee, according to the most recent research from Allegra Strategies, Project Cafe2016 UK Report, we believe that the number is c2.5billion paper cups per year.

Q Do all types of take-away packaging have this PE coating?

No, not all types of take-away packaging have this coating, as different materials have different properties. However, in addition to being used to make paper cups, polycoated board is also used to make other food packaging such as sandwich wrappers, paper-based ice-cream containers, soup and noodle pots, and other food and drink cartons. It is also used widely used across other packaging sectors.

Q. When can the industry commit to 100% recycling of paper cups?

Because there are a number of stages between handing over a cup to the consumer and the same cup arriving at a recycler, the recovery process is complex. This consumer has to dispose of the cup

¹ Source Defra, Government Statistical Service 15 December 2015

² Source INCPEN

in a bin without anything else placed in the cup. A number of retailers are trialling the use of separate bins for used paper cups which will significantly improve recovery rates.

The waste collector / local authority has to empty the bin, which is likely to be a litter bin, and take the contents to a Materials Recycling Facility (MRF).

The MRF has to decide to sort out cups from the other items. Different MRFs have different processes in place to identify cups from other items. This will only happen if the local authority / waste management company feels there is a value in doing so. One could argue if cups were made out of a single material then they could be simply sorted with other paper in the MRF. However, no such pure single material cup exists since the cup has to be able to hold a hot drink safely without going soggy or leaking which would waste far more resource than the resource used to make the cup in the first place. Alternative ways of applying a plastic lining have also been raised.

The PCRRG has an open mind regarding these developments and will review them with regard to scale, safety, recycling efficiency and most importantly fitness for purpose.

Q Why doesn't the industry use new formats with removable linings?

The PCRRG welcomes all innovations that help address the challenges of recycling more paper cups. However material innovations do not address the issues of getting the used cup to the correct facility. The PCRRG is working hard on developments in recovery and recycling infrastructure which will make the real difference. There is also the matter of scalability with new products, to supply a major retailer with the number of cups they require does not happen overnight as it requires correct production, distribution and logistics to ensure ongoing supply.

Q Why not switch to compostable or bio degradable cups?

The PCRRG sees a role of all material formats in reaching effective recovery and recycling solutions and compostable and bio-degradables are part of this solution. However, these formats must also arrive at the right reprocessing facility or they do not break down in the intended way. This again points to the importance of correct recovery and reprocessing at end of life.

Q Why not tax paper cups like the carrier bag charge?

The PCRRG believes that the issue of paper cups is not similar to the 'bag tax'. Taxing single-use paper cups will not increase recycling infrastructure and taxing single use paper cups will not affect behaviour of those who litter. The PCRRG believes changing consumer behaviour through education is the route to achieve this.

Q Why not introduce a Deposit Return Scheme and get consumers to return their cups?

The challenge here is that the value of the returned cup is very low and motivating consumers to return used cups in a condition good enough to recycle for very little reward is considered unlikely. Not only that, but coffee consumption away from home is driven by spontaneity and convenience which doesn't lend itself to carrying round used coffee cups. The introduction of a deposit scheme will also not address the lack of current recycling infrastructure for paper cups. Therefore, the group does not support the concept of deposit return schemes and is supporting the work of the British Plastics Federation and others in opposing the introduction of such schemes.

Q Why don't the brands issue consumers with re-usable cups?

The retail coffee brands are, in some instances, issuing or selling their consumers re-usable cups. The role of reusables is respected and a number of PCRRG retailer members offer incentives for

consumers bringing their own cups. However, reusables are not considered as a viable replacement for the whole of the paper cup stock for a number of reasons centred on consumer convenience.

Q Are forests being destroyed to make paper cups?

No. Trees used for commercial purposes are sustainably managed and in Europe forests are growing at the rate of 1.5 million soccer pitches annually (CPI) The majority of harvested trees are used for timber in the construction sector - just 20% is used for paper and paperboard production. In the UK we consume 9 million tonnes of paper and board annually of which cups account for 0.27%, the rest goes to paper, paper products and newsprint for newspaper and magazines.

Q What activity is actually planned? How long will the Manifesto run for?

The PCRRG working groups (Recycling & Infrastructure, Design & Product Sustainability, Communications & Engagement, Litter) have been developing detailed delivery plans for each of the focus areas of the Manifesto. The Manifesto will be in place until the objectives are achieved.

Q Is this just the industry's knee jerk reaction to Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall's "War on Waste" campaign?

The PCRRG has been working for some time on the issues presented by recycling paper cups and the topic was widely debated at the FPA Environment seminar in January 2016. However, the PCRRG acknowledges that more needs to be done and more quickly. The PCRRG welcomes the attention to the issue that has been generated by Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall's programme and that it has kick started the whole supply chain to take action.

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