

The Plastics Conundrum Part 4: **Where do we go from here?**

So how should food and drink businesses in Yorkshire and Humber respond to these complex issues and the expectations of stakeholders around specific challenges like marine plastics? A number of large food and drink businesses have recently announced initiatives including adopting plant-based polymers, moving to recyclable materials and take-back schemes. Recyclable is not the same as recycled, of course. In an ideal world, there would be a sufficiently-well invested infrastructure capable of dealing with all types of waste, not just plastic. Neither that nor new technologies are going to provide the solution any time soon. In the meantime, we have to make better use of the materials and technologies already available and follow the tried and tested hierarchy of 'reduce, re-use, recycle'. The concept of the circular economy (a new-ish term for a very old idea) has gained traction and has obvious merit but can run the risk of legitimising waste on the grounds that it becomes a resource elsewhere.

The first step in a considered management system must be to understand your stakeholders and their aspirations. The most comprehensive guidance is the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), now the go-to framework for environmental, societal and governance (ESG) engagement. As stakeholders look for increased evidence of responsible conduct, working to the SDG framework represents a great opportunity to deliver targeted action. Nothing exists in isolation, and that is perhaps more true of ESG than many other business issues. Comprising 17 inter-linking sets of targets, the Goals encompass many of the issues reflected in recent, and probable future, regulation and reflect the interconnectedness of ESG considerations. Goal 14, 'Life Below Water', clearly links to the problem of marine plastics and within Goal 12 'Responsible Consumption and Production', target 12.3 calls for a halving of global food waste. Sadly, when asked which among the Goals are their priorities, businesses rarely cite SDG14, a clear example of the tragedy of the commons.



Banners at Keele University highlighting and celebrating the Sustainable Development Goals, December 2018

At first glance, the SDGs can look daunting, but needn't be; specialist organisations can help businesses of all sizes find their way through the maze of ESG issues they face. A structured process drawing on the experience of the team within the business and the expertise of an external facilitator gets to the genuinely material issues and what actions should be taken to mitigate them. Packaging, for instance, may or may not be the biggest issue in any given business, and this process can help ensure that risks are properly evaluated and business decisions can be clearly communicated to stakeholders. This also helps avoid the risk of 'greenwash' and the associated reputational damage it can cause. Progressively more businesses in the UK and elsewhere are building their ESG reporting around the Goals, and awareness among younger people is growing as they now feature prominently in UK Business Schools. Over a year on from Blue Planet II, Sir David Attenborough took The People's Seat at the UN's COP 24 conference in Poland and expectations are still high. I often survey people on where they think responsibility for a sustainable society lies. Citizens, particularly younger citizens, expect business to do the due diligence on their behalf. That in itself is a pretty compelling reason to engage with the SDG agenda.

[The Plastics Conundrum Part 1: The road to hell is paved with good intentions](#)

[The Plastics Conundrum Part 2: It's all downhill from here \(to the ocean\)](#)

[The Plastics Conundrum Part 3: What's going on?](#)

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