

Everyday Flexibles Recycling Assembly

Dr Torik Holmes, Hallsworth Research Fellow, University of Manchester (UoM), Sustainable Consumption Institute (SCI) and Sustainable Materials Innovation (SMI) Hub collaborator
torik.holmes@manchester.ac.uk

Call to action

UK post-consumer flexible plastic packaging recycling poses a systemic and sadly growing challenge, which demands crosscutting multi-stakeholder responses. With an eye on the shifting waste policy landscape, including the introduction of kerbside film collections by 2027 as part of Simpler Recycling and the evolving effects of Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR), the *Everyday Flexibles Recycling Assembly* will provide a timely and much-needed forum to generate responses aimed at accelerating sustainable packaging transitions.

The assembly will bring together 15-25 experts from across the flexible plastic packaging supply chain (inc., packaging designers, retailers, data and tracking experts, waste management and reprocessing professionals) for a focused in-person roundtable, jointly hosted by the University of Manchester's (UoM) [Sustainable Consumption Institute \(SCI\)](#), [Sustainable Materials Innovation Hub](#), and [Henry Royce Institute](#).

Drawing on their professional knowledge and expertise, assembly members will share insights and discuss the challenges wrapped up with flexibles recycling, subsequently working together to discern a set of best practice responses and recommendations. There will also be an opportunity to discuss the university's research and innovation resources and capacity to collaborate on projects aimed at configuring sustainable pathways for flexible packaging.

The initial, **in-person** assembly will be held on the **13th of August**, between **10:30** and **15:00**, at the **University of Manchester's AMBS Business School**.

Lunch and refreshments will be provided.

If you are interested in participating, **please fill in the linked form**.

Extended research rationale

Flexibles currently represent over 20% of UK consumer plastic packaging and their use is on the rise ([Wrap, 2023](#)). While the use of flexibles makes sense from a product lightweighting perspective, echoing well-meaning agendas to shrink carbon footprints and reduce the use of plastics, their growing use poses a systemic challenge regarding recycling in the UK and beyond.

As is well known, flexibles are harder to collect and sort than their rigid counterparts. It's also well established that even when collected and sorted, flexibles carry very little (if any) market value and that they pose a series of reprocessing challenges. As a result, flexibles are typically downcycled into refuse sacks and plastic lumber.

Unsurprisingly, few local authorities collect flexibles and those that do struggle to find appropriate homes for them, with a clear UK plastics reprocessing bottleneck continuing to pose problems ([Recoup, 2022](#)).

Despite all this, plans are in place to roll out household collections of flexible films by 2027 ([Defra, 2025](#)). Though welcome in terms of recognising the need to tackle flexible packaging, there remains a clear and increasingly present danger that a great deal of resources will be dedicated to harvesting vast quantities of materials that remain difficult to reprocess in the UK and therefore stubbornly destined for unsustainable ends, including incineration, landfilling and export. While it is hoped that EPR will mitigate the problems posed by flexibles, the effects remain uncertain, with learning from previous policy implementations, such as the Plastic Packaging Tax (PPT), suggesting there could well be unintended and unwelcome consequences.

In response, a crosscutting, multi-stakeholder 'assembly', i.e., a gathering of those with the common purpose of tackling the challenges posed by post-consumer flexibles, is clearly needed. The *Everyday Flexibles Recycling Assembly* will provide this forum. Drawing on the expertise of professional stakeholders, from across the supply chain, the assembly will work to discern a set of practical responses and recommendations concerning flexible packaging recycling to be distilled by UoM researchers, agreed upon with members, and publicly disseminated. As part of a wide-reaching [three-year fellowship on organisational capacities to improve UK post-consumer plastics recycling](#), the assembly will further provide an occasion for members to discuss the university's research and innovation resources and capacity to collaborate on projects aimed at configuring sustainable pathways for plastic packaging.

Expected outcomes

The projected outcomes of the assembly acknowledge the inherent variability of plastic waste, thanks to its connections with changing consumer habits, packaging innovations, and unfolding policy updates. The likely outcomes include the following:

- The assembly itself will provide an independent forum to share professional experience and to build shared organizational knowledge and capacity regarding the betterment of UK flexibles recycling.
- Member agreed best practice principles and approaches will be distilled in publications generated by the UoM research lead.