

Could consistent collections boost aluminium packaging recycling rates?

Tom Giddings* discusses the government's consultation on consistent collections and explains how national uniformity could further boost the UK's aluminium packaging recycling rates.

According to data released by the Environment Agency (April '21), UK aluminium packaging recycling reached its highest ever rate in 2020. 68% of material placed on the market was collected for recycling – including 82% of all aluminium

beverage cans.

An increase to 151,515 tonnes year-on-year, and exceeding targets by a staggering 15%, demonstrates the continued impact of changing consumer behaviours and increasing awareness of the benefits of

recycling. In a market where aluminium packaging sales figures rose significantly, this is highly positive news for the future.

However, as aluminium recycling rates continue to increase, it becomes ever-more challenging to maintain this upward

trajectory. Although we've seen success already in getting the basics right, we're now relying on households recycling correctly, new innovation from the waste management industry and government-driven legislation to help recover the shrinking proportion of aluminium packaging not collected for recycling.

One thing is certain – further improving recycling rates requires even greater

commitment and collaboration between consumers, businesses, the government and the packaging supply chain. What's more, every single tonne counts!

The opportunity of consistent collections

While the picture may seem challenging, the recently-launched consultation on consistent collections is yet another step in the right direction. Unveiled in May, the consultation aims to gather insight and evidence from across the waste management industry regarding the design of kerbside collection systems and specification of materials collected in England.

For the aluminium packaging recycling industry, the initial proposals look positive. Indeed, local authorities could soon be mandated to collect every last tonne of aluminium foil, aerosols and tubes from all households and businesses across England (alongside those already legislated).

While many local authorities are already collecting all possible formats of aluminium packaging, others are somewhat behind the pace. The latest insight suggests that 16% still don't have the systems in place to collect aluminium foil, while 5% are unable to collect aluminium aerosol containers.

It may not seem like a huge opportunity on the surface, but collection reform will further increase the volume of aluminium packaging collected from both households and businesses – instrumental when it comes to increasing recycling rates year-on-year and capturing the elusive remaining tonnage.

More importantly still, consistency in terms of formats collected will prevent perfectly recyclable material from being unnecessarily landfilled. This should be seen as an absolute travesty when you consider that aluminium is an infinitely recyclable packaging material and that 75% of all aluminium ever produced is still in circulation today.

The circular properties of aluminium packaging

Aluminium's ability to form any shape and its superior protective qualities make it the most practical packaging material in the world. Flexible, lightweight and almost impossible to contaminate, it's the undisputed packaging material of choice

for numerous applications.

Whereby most people associate aluminium with just beverage cans, it's used for a truly diverse range of packaging containers. Indeed, from cans and caps, to foils, bottles, tubes and aerosol containers, aluminium is used to protect thousands of our day-to-day consumables.

But alongside being highly demanded, the ability to recycle aluminium packaging again and again, without losing its properties, make it highly sustainable too. Indeed, recycling aluminium to create new packaging materials uses 95% less energy when compared to primary production from raw materials.

The consultation on consistent collections therefore provides us with a significant opportunity. By mandating the collection of all possible aluminium packaging fractions, harnessing the value of every last item and ensuring nothing is lost to landfill is becoming ever-more achievable.

Legislation on its own, however, is not enough. It's important that we continue to educate households about the recyclability of aluminium packaging and how best to do so. While local authorities rolling out collections to include all formats provides the necessary mechanism to capture more aluminium packaging, consumer engagement is imperative to ensure that it actually is collected.

Looking to the future

As we transition towards the next chapter in our national waste management strategy, it's important that we remember two critical priorities. Firstly, every tonne of aluminium packaging collected for recycling counts – not just beverage cans, but caps, foils, bottles, tubes and aerosol containers too. Secondly, education will play an instrumental role in ensuring householders continue to recycle their spent packaging.

As we wait to see the results of the government's consultation on collection consistency, the future looks bright – brighter still if we're able to maximise collaboration between consumers, businesses, the government and the packaging supply chain. Moving ever-closer to the real possibility of 100% recycling rates across the UK remains challenging, but is looking more possible than ever before. ■

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