



Plastic packaging progress

COVER STORY

The aim of the pact – led by sustainability charity WRAP – is to eliminate unnecessary single-use plastic packaging by 2025, so that by then all plastic packaging is either reusable, recyclable or compostable.

A report from WRAP, released earlier this year, provides an insight into what businesses have achieved since signing up to the pact. While providing a snapshot of what some businesses have achieved so far, it is not comprehensive, due to the commercially sensitive nature of some of the initiatives.

Supermarkets have taken a number of steps over the past year. For example, many have stopped selling 5p single use carrier bags, replaced plastic drinking straws with paper versions, substituted plastic-stemmed cotton buds with paper ones, and removed plastic cups from their sites.

Discounters Aldi and Lidl have made some bold moves. Aldi has, for example, cut more than 1,050 tonnes of non-recyclable plastic annually by using recyclable packaging for its Ashfield Farm range of sliced cooked meats, and has eliminated 880 tonnes of non-recyclable plastic by replacing black trays with clear ones. Lidl, meanwhile, is

removing plastic punnets for vegetables or switching to cardboard ones, has eliminated all non-detectable black plastic from its fruit and veg primary packaging (and is committed to removing black plastic from its fresh meat, poultry and fish this year) and has replaced polystyrene pizza bases with cardboard ones, as has Tesco for its own brand pizzas.

Other supermarket initiatives include Asda replacing all its black plastic fruit and vegetable trays with clear plastic, removing black plastic as part of the redesign of packaging for its Extra Special range, and embedding requirements for additional recycled content into all new product development processes and briefing documents. Tesco has a similar initiative where it has produced a list of preferred materials which are widely recycled and contain recycled content for all of its own brand packaging.

M&S, meanwhile, has replaced plastic cutlery with FSC-certified wood alternatives in all its stores and cafes, has phased out 1,700 tonnes of black plastic packaging from fruit and veg and some ready meals, replaced plastic produce bags with paper alternatives in all UK stores, and widely uses 30% recycled



content across its plastic bottles and trays. In addition, tea bags contain no plastic and all plastic in coffee pods was set to have been replaced with recyclable aluminium by this summer.

Morrisons has banned expanded polystyrene packaging from its own brand food and drink products – representing more than 600 tonnes of plastic – and has trialed a reverse vending machine which accepts PET bottles and cans to improve recycling rates, while its new PET meat and fish trays contain a minimum of 80% recycled content. The store group is also committed to have removed all black plastic packaging from own-brand products by the end of the year, amounting to some 3,300 tonnes of non-recyclable packaging. Since the report was published, Morrison's has announced it will be rolling out plastic-free fruit and veg areas in some of its stores, where customers will be able to buy them loose or put them in recyclable paper bags. Similarly, Tesco is piloting a scheme where pre-packed fruit and veg has been replaced with loose equivalents.



> Waitrose now offers customers refill options.



> Morrisons will soon be rolling out its plastic-free fruit and veg areas.

Nestlé has established its own Institute of Packaging Sciences to further develop sustainable materials.

As well as adopting many pledges similar to those of other supermarkets, Waitrose has extended its Unpacked scheme, where unpackaged loose products – such as pasta, cereals, rice, frozen fruit, beer and wine – are available in large dispensers for customers to buy using their own containers. The supermarket has also replaced all its plastic bags for loose fruit and veg with home compostable ones, and is committed to have all its own brand packaging recyclable, reusable or compostable by 2023.

Sainsbury's is progressing with the removal of plastic packaging on an increasing number of produce and meat lines, while 69% of its plastic packaging





is widely recyclable and all sparkling water bottles will have changed from green to clear by the end of 2019. It's also planning a trial for 'pre-cycling' – that is an in-store area for customers to remove and leave unwanted packaging, so protecting the food through the supply chain but offering the customer the option of recycling before leaving the store. The company also claims to be the most committed to providing customer recycling facilities at its stores, including those for glass, cans, cardboard and plastic bottles.

Manufacturers

KP Snacks has cut the amount of packaging it uses by 11% over the last 10 years. It has introduced flow wrap multipacks on Hula Hoops and McCoy's six-packs, with further investment over the next 2-3 years to significantly reduce its use of plastic film on multipacks. It's also investigating alternative materials – including non-fossil-based ones – that deliver comparable performance without increasing food waste, and has launched a recycling programme with recycling specialist TerraCycle. Similarly, Pepsico launched the UK's first nationwide crisp packet recycling scheme with TerraCycle, where packets are cleaned and shredded and then made into plastic pellets to produce items such as park benches, plant pots, watering cans and cool bags. KP is also working with governments and stakeholders on the design of a deposit return scheme for drinks containers.

Quorn has pledged all of its manufacturing sites will be free of single-use plastics by the end of this year.

Quorn has pledged that all of its manufacturing sites will be free of single-use plastic by the end of this year. Eighty percent of its product range packaging is currently recyclable, and it is committed to 100% recyclability by 2025. It will also have recycling guidance on all of its packaging by the end of this year.



> Nestlé's Yes snack bars in recyclable paper wraps.

Photo Credit: Nestlé SA.

Unilever says it has led the market with PG Tips using fully biodegradable plant-based material to heat seal teabags. The teabags use corn starch which is 100% biodegradable and renewable, so consumers can dispose of their tea bags with their food waste. The company is also changing its Bombay Bad Boy Pot Noodle pots from black to white.

Other initiatives include Proctor & Gamble running a project to develop tracers and watermarks, such as fluorescent pigments that are only visible in ultra-violet light, so that machines can identify different kinds of plastic. P&G has also working to recycle polypropylene to the same standard as newly manufactured plastic.

Separately, Nestlé has established its Institute of Packaging Sciences to evaluate and develop sustainable packaging materials and to collaborate with industrial partners to develop new packaging materials and solutions, such as recyclable, biodegradable or compostable polymers, functional paper, as well as new packaging concepts and technologies to increase the recyclability of plastic packaging. The company has also started using

paper packaging for Nesquik and the Yes! Snack bar, while Smarties will have plastic-free packaging.

Criticism

The UK Plastics Pact is not immune from criticism, however. Critics say it's not ambitious enough, that most plastic is being shipped to countries which don't have an effective recycling infrastructure, and that it's a fig-leaf for business as usual and for the government to avoid enacting legislation.

Responding to the critics at a recent environmental packaging summit, Peter Maddox, director of WRAP UK, described the pact as: "A unique, world-first platform which brings together businesses, governments and citizens...to work collaboratively on a systemic solution to tackle plastic pollution.

"It is systemic – not piecemeal. It brings together all the stakeholders who hold it in their power to implement massive change. This means we can tap into their insights and knowledge to come up with solutions which work and avoid unintended consequences. They know the public expect nothing less than radical change." **FMT**