

Sustainable Materials Innovation Hub
6th Floor, Royce Hub Building,
The University of Manchester,
Oxford Road,
Manchester,
M13 9PL
smihub.ac.uk

Mayor of Greater Manchester
GMCA
56 Oxford Road
Manchester
M1 6EU

10 March 2023

Dear Andy Burnham,

SUSTAINABLE MATERIALS INNOVATION HUB CALLS ON MAYOR TO GRASP OPPORTUNITIES TO IMPROVE PLASTIC RECYCLING ACROSS THE NORTH

Greater Manchester has a history of ambition and innovation when looking to transform the way it manages waste. Over the past quarter century recycling rates have risen from some of the poorest in the country – low single digits in the late 90's, where most waste was going to landfill, to an average of just under 50% in 2021/22 with some boroughs having exceeded 60%. This was a consequence of significant investments in new waste management infrastructure over 15 years ago, with now more than 97% of waste successfully diverted away from landfill.

However, those recycling rates have stubbornly plateaued and during the pandemic declined. Waste is an issue we all interact with daily. It deserves urgent attention to improve the systems that are currently in place. With significant upcoming changes to waste policy, our system will need to once again be transformed to both meet legal requirements and play its part in the region becoming carbon neutral by 2038. We need to urgently move away from the damaging incineration of materials such as plastic packaging (even with energy recovery) and move towards a system that retains the value of these materials. Currently, around three times more waste plastic in the UK goes to incineration than is mechanically recycled. More waste plastics are also exported abroad than domestically recycled. Increasing restrictions from countries receiving this waste (China in 2017, Turkey in 2021) highlight that it is only fair that we deal with the waste plastics we produce, whilst investing in local infrastructure that will boost the economy. Both proposed legislation that will ban the export of plastic waste and economic drivers increasing demand for recycled plastics (Plastic Packaging Tax and the voluntary UK Plastics Pact) have stimulated markets for these materials, meaning now is the time to act.

Since the Sustainable Materials Innovation Hub (SMI Hub) launched in 2020, we have been working on numerous cutting-edge projects related to plastics and waste management. The “One Bin to Rule Them All” project has focussed on simplifying household kerbside collections whilst capturing more materials for recycling. A policy white paper will be released at the end of the month. Upon your review, we would be delighted to gain your support in taking our recommendations further. In addition, we have been providing support to over 80 local SMEs covering advice over concerns on the sustainability of plastic to helping companies research, innovate and commercialise new technologies through our ERDF programme.

From our insights and experience, we believe there are significant opportunities for GM to lead the country in creating local additional capacity to sort and mechanically recycle a wide range of plastic packaging materials in a more integrated manner. We welcome the creation of a Task & Finish Group looking to understand technological solutions for various waste streams and volunteer to lead this as part of University of Manchester’s commitment to Civic Engagement. We will look to broaden this group’s focus than just looking at technical solutions in isolation, as tying this into the wider economic opportunities related to creating additional recycling capacity is crucial. We commonly hear that there are no viable markets for recycled plastics such as pots, trays and tubs or flexibles that are not currently kerbside collected in GM. We believe this is no longer the case. Demand for these materials will only grow further as the Environment Act 2021 comes into force with packaging Extended Producer Responsibility and a drinks container Deposit Return Scheme both imminent. The challenge is capacity, with the lack of local mechanical recycling infrastructure necessitating long transportation distances that increase cost and carbon footprint.

Addressing the capacity issue will demonstrate practical Northern leadership that goes further and faster in helping create prosperity for the region, whilst improving our environment. We want to help develop a case for investing in GM recycling infrastructure that will be impossible for Whitehall to refuse.

To successfully underpin this new capacity in recycling infrastructure will be a need for additional research, skills and innovation to continually test and create solutions to circularise and reduce waste. The University of Manchester is leading the REFORM CDT (**RE**sponsible **F**ates of **pO**lyme**R**s and their **M**ulti-materials Centre for Doctoral Training), alongside partners at UCL and Sheffield, bringing together expertise in sustainable consumption and circular economy. The CDT will develop key skills in PhD students to enable them to contribute to sustainability research during their training and wider careers. These are the skills needed for the UK to transition to a circular economy, and we see GM as the centre of this movement.

A key goal of the CDT bid is to develop a more circular approach to materials through increased re-use, repair, remanufacturing and recycling, representing a fundamental change in our approach to waste. That this bid is led by Manchester shows the significance of sustainable approaches to both the region and its universities and will further cement GM’s position as a leader in this area. We would warmly

appreciate a letter of support from the Mayor's office as a sign of GM's commitment to help develop our innovative centre of expertise.

Greater Manchester, as the home of the first industrial revolution and a global leader in manufacturing innovation, has an opportunity to lead a recycling and remanufacturing revolution. Realising the economic value from plastic waste will serve as a foundation for a sustainable, circular economy to position our city region at the forefront of economic growth and environmental stewardship.

Yours Sincerely,



Prof. Michael Shaver
Director Sustainable Materials Innovation Hub
Director Sustainable Futures