

Organics Recycling

The quarterly members'
magazine from the Organics
Recycling Group of the REA

Winter 2018

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PLASTICS OUT

COMPOSTABLES IN THE HOUSES
OF PARLIAMENT



Plastics out of Parliament

The Parliamentary Estate recently introduced compostable products in place of some single-use plastics, one of a raft of waste reduction measures. Will Simpson talks to **Glenn Fleetwood**, Parliament's Environmental Compliance Manager, and his team, about the actions being taken to make Parliament more sustainable

It's the day after the Brexit Withdrawal agreement was unveiled and in the cafe area of the House of Commons you can spot politicians deep in conversation about that most emotive of issues. But whilst MPs have been deeply divided on the issue of EU membership, when it comes to their own environmental affairs there has been a remarkable consensus. As the nation's lawmakers, they know they have to set an example.

"That idea of being ahead of the curve has been front and centre of our environmental policy since it was written," says Glenn Fleetwood, Parliament's Environmental Compliance Manager, as he admires the new compostable bins the cafe has recently introduced. "When we presented these plans to the committee meetings that decide these things, both Houses were extremely keen to get on with it."

That environmental policy is something the Parliamentary Estate

plans to make Parliament more sustainable have accelerated in recent years. In June 2018 the first phase saw the introduction of reusable coffee cups. Then, in October, Parliament rolled out a new range of compostable products to replace single-use plastics, stopped the sale of bottled water and phased out plastic condiment sachets and replaced them with self-service sauce pumps.

"We started tracking alternatives to plastic technology in 2016 just to keep an eye on what was out there," says Fleetwood. At this point, he and the catering teams for both Houses were impressed by compostables manufacturer Vegware and its range of products. Fleetwood admits that another significant catalyst was the BBC series *Blue Planet 2*: "After that there was increased political attention on it and a pledge by many MPs to go plastic-free."

It wasn't just the range of products that made Vegware a top choice for Parliament. "Vegware

our waste contractor Bywaters, so there is a synergy there," says Antony Avella, Purchasing and Stores Manager for the House of Commons' Catering Services. "By choosing a single supplier it made identification of the products through the waste system much easier for everybody and gave us the best chance of success."

As the supreme law-making body in the land, you might well ask why Parliament hasn't introduced these measures sooner. "We needed a full product range and the market to be ready to accept what we were going to put out," explains Fleetwood. "We looked at just doing coffee cups. We buy in about 800,000 of those per year, but that is still a drop in the ocean. To put in an entire waste system to just deal with that – the very low weight of waste compared to the whole total – would have been very inefficient. The Estate has very little space to install the segregation structure – and the range that our catering teams could actually work with and make work operationally only came out this year."

There were also procedural hurdles to overcome. Although they share the same buildings, Commons and Lords are separate entities and both administrations had to agree separately to go down this route. Luckily, the plan was agreed by both Houses with the minimum of fuss.

The new system has seen over 800 blue composting bins put in place. From here, the compostables are consolidated on site, then collected and taken to a waste transfer



Examples of Vegware's range of compostable products

station where they are de-bagged and put into a bulk container. Once that bulk container is full it is then transferred to an in-vessel composting facility, while the rest of the Estate's organic waste is still taken off-site to an anaerobic digestion plant.

It's early days for the system so Fleetwood and his team don't yet know what sort of tonnages are now being composted, nor how much is still lost in the system. "People are still getting used to it. In the next quarter we're expecting to get a clearer idea of how much waste we are segregating." The Estate now has a zero waste to landfill policy – residual waste goes to an energy-from-waste facility in Bexley, Kent – and a recycling target of 75 per cent to hit by 2021.

Central to all this has been creating a common sense of purpose across a number of departments. "Communication has been really important. We have briefed all our catering teams and our managers have quite a strong directive in terms of the signage around the catering outlets." A sustainable procurement programme has been put in place by the Parliamentary Procurement and Commercial Service, with Fleetwood himself assuming a position of central importance. "I sit alongside the Energy Manager and the Comms Officer whenever the Environment Team engages with another department," he explains.

"We're not a team that goes in and tries to fix everything. We go into departments and work with them to change what we think needs changing. When we first approached catering some years ago we already found that Antony and his team were well ahead of the game. We needed to fix our end and provide an outlet for all of the environmentally-friendly products that he was already buying in but which weren't being disposed of properly."

Circularity is something Fleetwood and the catering teams are looking to improve, though they admit the small scale of the Estate is a problem. "Our waste cooking oil becomes fuel after it is used and our food disposables are now



compostables, but circularity is difficult if you're not buying in bulk. Compared to a large organisation we produce waste on a relatively small scale and our buying power is much smaller than our visibility."

The next phase of the policy will be implemented in 2019. Plastic carrier bags are to be phased out in all Parliamentary retail outlets, a green stationery range is going to be introduced and moves made to grapple with the problems of packaging. "Recently we met with the Lords and they raised the issue of the plastics we hadn't talked to them about already – polythene wrappers and that sort of thing. We made a commitment to continue looking at it until we have eliminated plastics everywhere.

When methods and technologies change we can go further with it."

"At the moment the main focus is really everything customer-based," confirms Avella. "The next step is to look at delivery, warehousing and packaging and start linking that with organic recycling. We are already planning to run workshops with some of our suppliers to see whether they can come up with solutions to reduce the amount of plastic in their packaging. This really is the start of the process rather than an end point."

Even if Britain's political future is currently up in the air, our legislature appears to be fully focused on at least one of its missions: to make its own institution sustainable.