# UK faces major hurdles to meet 2027 mandatory plastic film collection deadline



The UK plastic recycling sector is at a critical juncture as the deadline for mandatory kerbside collection of plastic films approaches in April 2027. According to a report by the Waste and Resources Action Programme (WRAP), significant barriers must be overcome to enable local authorities to meet this government target. Currently, the UK processes a mere seven per cent of the flexible plastics introduced to the market annually, highlighting a substantial gap in recycling capacity that could grow increasingly problematic.

The WRAP report, entitled ‘Circular Films: Pathways to Scalable Recycling’, identifies five strategic pathways designed to revamp the country's plastic film recycling infrastructure. Notably, it estimates that between 336,000 and 450,000 tonnes of consumer film could enter the UK market every year, with recyclable materials such as mono-polyethylene (mono-PE) and mono-polypropylene (mono-PP) comprising 68 per cent of this volume, contingent upon proper sorting and collection. Yet, a stark reality remains: only 12 per cent of local authorities currently offer kerbside collection for plastic films, which means that much of this recyclable waste remains uncollected.

Adding to this challenge, interim findings from various industry trials, including the FlexCollect project initiated last year, suggest that even with mandated collection, England could see only about 123,000 tonnes of plastic film recycled, slightly denting the national recycling rates by an estimated five per cent. There remains a significant question over whether the requisite infrastructure can be developed in time to accommodate these targets.

A multitude of operational challenges exist, including the lightweight nature of films, diverse polymer compositions, high contamination rates, and the complexity of multi-layer structures. Moreover, public participation and local on-site storage limitations further complicate the landscape of plastic film recycling. The report articulates these issues succinctly, stating, “Achieving scaled film recycling is key to a more circular plastics economy, but progress is held back by low material value, limited infrastructure, and restricted technological capability.” These constraints are exacerbated by the presence of cheap imports and the burgeoning concerns over unverified claims within the sector.

Moreover, as the government rolls out its ‘Simpler Recycling’ initiative, local authorities face mounting preparatory hurdles. WRAP has pinpointed critical bottlenecks related to permitting and planning delays, existing contractual obligations, and the drawn-out lead times required for necessary equipment acquisitions. The upcoming requirements will demand a massive expansion in service provision, with the onus also falling on 312 local authorities to implement collections by March 2027 to fulfil new compliance mandates.

The Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee's report underscores the urgency of addressing these issues, suggesting the need to double the UK’s domestic sorting and recycling facilities to keep pace with future waste management targets. Challenges to securing investment, particularly given the volatility of income streams and external markets, make this imperative even more urgent. To pave the way for substantial recycling enhancements, the UK must formulate policies that incentivise domestic recycling and lend support to local recyclers struggling under the current economic climate.

Furthermore, reports indicate that between 2019 and 2021, consumer flexible plastic entering the UK market surged by 55,000 tonnes, but local authority collection rates stalled at a mere 16 per cent. With only 14 per cent of councils currently collecting these materials, the path ahead seems daunting.

Yet, initiatives like FlexCollect, which aims to pilot new household collection practices for flexible plastic waste, represent a beacon of hope amidst these challenges. This collaborative project, co-funded by the Flexible Plastic Fund and UK Research and Innovation, aspires to significantly boost recovery and recycling rates.

As the overarching policy landscape evolves, the UK government’s commitment to standardise recycling practices marks a crucial step. However, the imminent transition to mandatory collections demands immediate action to address the entrenched barriers within the recycling sector. The future of UK plastic recycling hinges on the ability to mobilise resources, enhance technological capabilities, and foster community engagement—steps essential to realising a more circular economy.

### Reference Map

1. Paragraphs 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7
2. Paragraph 2, 6
3. Paragraphs 3, 4
4. Paragraph 4
5. Paragraph 5
6. Paragraph 6
7. Paragraph 6

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## Bibliography

1. <https://resource.co/article/plastic-film-recycling-capacity-gap-looms-ahead-2027-target> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm5803/cmselect/cmenvfru/22/report.html> - The UK Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee's report highlights the insufficient recycling capacity in the UK, emphasizing the need to double domestic sorting and recycling facilities to meet future targets. It discusses barriers to investment, such as fluctuating income streams and the export market, and stresses the importance of developing policies to incentivize domestic recycling and support UK plastic recyclers.
3. <https://www.thegrocer.co.uk/plastic/uk-facing-huge-recycling-shortfall-as-household-plastic-film-mountain-grows-by-55k-tonnes/685649.article> - An article from The Grocer reports on a WRAP study revealing a 55,000-tonne increase in consumer flexible plastic entering the UK market from 2019 to 2021. Despite this, local authority collection rates have stagnated, with only 16% of councils collecting plastic films at the kerbside. The article underscores the urgent need for expanded recycling infrastructure to meet upcoming government targets.
4. <https://www.recoup.org/2024/12/17/recoup-uk-plastic-packaging-collection-survey-outlines-monumental-challenge/> - RECOUP's UK Household Plastic Packaging Collection Survey outlines the monumental challenge ahead, noting that only 14% of councils currently collect plastic films and flexibles. The survey indicates that 312 local authorities need to implement these collections by March 2027 to comply with requirements, highlighting the unprecedented expansion in service provision required.
5. <https://www.ukri.org/news/major-project-to-boost-flexible-plastic-packaging-recycling-launches/> - UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) announces the launch of FlexCollect, the UK's largest collaborative project to support the collection and recycling of flexible plastic packaging. Co-funded by the Flexible Plastic Fund and UKRI's Smart Sustainable Plastic Packaging Challenge, the project aims to pilot household collections of flexible plastic packaging waste to significantly increase recovery and recycling rates.
6. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/simpler-recycling-in-england-policy-update/simpler-recycling-in-england-policy-update> - The UK government's 'Simpler Recycling' policy update outlines timelines for implementing recycling reforms. By 31 March 2027, local authorities are required to collect recyclable plastic film from businesses, non-domestic premises, and households. The policy aims to standardize recycling practices and improve the efficiency of waste management across England.
7. <https://www.bpf.co.uk/publications/uk-plastic-recycling-market-conditions.aspx> - The British Plastics Federation's report discusses the challenges faced by the UK plastic recycling industry, including the loss of approximately 260,000 tonnes per year of recycling capacity due to site closures. The report emphasizes the need for government support to prevent further closures and to incentivize domestic recycling to develop a circular economy in the UK.