

Plastic Statement

As an ethical distributor and wholesaler, Essential actively source from suppliers who use sustainable packaging options at the production stage. We are constantly seeking out solutions to minimise packaging waste in all areas of the supply chain, and throughout the years we have been trying to find plastic-free solutions to packaging.

We have stopped the sale of plastic water bottles and introduced over 100 new plastic-free product lines, from body care to household products and consumables. We pack our own products in recyclable and compostable packaging wherever possible. While we have not yet found an alternative to using shrink wrap to secure our palletised deliveries, we do recycle it all using a specialist recycling facility.

Essential Trading is delighted to see the increase in zero waste shops and is proud to support a number of zero waste retailers in the South West and beyond. We are working on a larger and minimal-packaging range to further support these outlets. Our Harvest shops in Bristol and Bath have offered a popular re-fill section since 1971.

Our effort to source eco-friendly, fit for purpose packaging for our own retail packs is ongoing, as we strive to be part of a solution to the unfolding climate crisis. In 2018 we started hand-packing flour in paper bags sealed with paper tape – a perfect solution for the commodities that can maintain their quality when packed in paper. Unfortunately, paper packaging is still not suitable for most of our goods. The packaging must be strong, tamperproof and durable enough to outlive the shelf life of the product. Due to the fact that we package a wide range of products using different systems, machines and sealing methods, there is no one solution to cover all bases.

In 2021, we began exploring the use of an alternative packaging polymer, which could potentially be used as a replacement for conventional plastics in our packaging. One disadvantage is that the raw materials are still oil-based. However, the product is biodegradable and fully recyclable in existing recycling systems. This includes when it is used as lining of paper packaging. We are in the testing phase of this packaging. Testing is not a straightforward process as the material has to work with our existing packaging machinery. Research is ongoing for a supplier of paper bags/sacks and stitching equipment in which to pack our bulk/catering size products.

Some of the components we have explored include cellophane that is made of wood pulp, but is much more porous than plastic film. This reduces shelf-life significantly, causing increased food waste – another big factor in food production that we want to avoid. In addition, the edges of cellophane packaging are still heat-sealed with plastic, which render it non-compostable.

We have also looked into corn starch alternatives to plastic, but unfortunately the corn starch used currently is genetically modified - a big no-no for us - and still uses plastic in its sealed edges. Interestingly, Riverford Organics worked with Exeter University to undertake research into packaging and found that starch-based plastics are actually worse for the environment than normal plastic. In addition, recycling plastic becomes impossible when corn starch plastic is added into the mix.

Our pre-packs are made from Polypropylene (type 5 plastic. This is more recyclable and less toxic than other types, and hence used for packaging food. Sadly, few local authorities in the UK currently recycle type 5 plastic. We should all pile on the pressure and demand that this capability is made more widespread.

As technology advances and demand for sustainable packaging rightly puts pressure on manufacturers to invest in such developments, we hope that we are making strides towards finding a suitably sustainable material to replace our current pre-packs.

For more information on the pros and cons of various materials, here is some recommended reading material: <https://www.ecoenclose.com/Paper-versus-Plastic-and-Bio-Plastic/>