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TIME TO TAKE STOCK?

How should the industry adapt and become more resilient post-Covid-19?
The director of Monksleigh offers his thoughts

The Covid-19 pandemic raises many issues for the waste sector. But, as we have moved to a resource industry, it is incumbent on us to think about the increased reliance supply chains will have on us in the future.

With a more circular economy, what do we need to start implementing to deliver resilience and confidence to those who will come to rely on our materials – and us on them – in the future, especially in times of disruption? Here are some thoughts.



have to stop? If we stop collecting and processing materials, or users stop receiving them, there will be a 'domino effect' on production and manufacturing, and the wider supply chains.

4. Should we be reviewing overall storage and buffer capacity in the system?

Changing collection frequencies or allowing minor extensions to permit capacity only buys small gains. So how much storage/resilience needs to be in the system, when many processes are relying on reverse manufacturing-type approaches with tonnes-per-hour constraints?

1. Should we accelerate initiatives to improve measurement of tonnage and the mapping of flows before implementing changes? There are some big assumptions and unknowns, especially in commercial and industrial waste streams. Defra-funded initiatives to improve measurement are more important than ever to understand fully what is happening with waste flows and, in particular, movements down the supply chain, so any unintended consequences can be avoided before changes are implemented.

The effects of the pandemic must be included in this thinking – the old adage of 'can't manage what you don't measure' being especially poignant with the desire to test more people for Covid-19 to inform future strategy.

2. Should we be accelerating the building of more UK infrastructure, and would that make us less – or more – resilient to disruption in our market? We may lose some resilience by being unable to buffer our supply demand outside our shores. We need a strategic balance between internal infrastructure and the amount we export, but should it be set from the top?

With most infrastructure projects taking multiple years to come to fruition, we can't afford to wait. It's hard enough to reassure investors seeking certainty in the current climate when there is uncertainty about the three consultations, which are not yet finalised.

3. If we build more capacity and use secondary resources in a truly circular way, do we create interrelationships and resource demands that weaken the supply chain when things get tough and

5. Should we have landfill at a 'reserve capacity' on a rolling basis that allows a rapid switch if needed? Landfill is the only waste infrastructure that can flex dramatically on input rate. It becomes an essential balancing option – nothing else can fill the gap at reasonably short notice.

So, should reserves be secured for extreme events? The provision of high-quality, well-managed landfill has always been a fundamental requirement of delivering public health before any wider environmental aspirations, and we neglect this at our peril.

6. Is the current consultation on a more complex packaging recovery note (PRN) system the way forward? It will be a highly complex system involving the collection of money and redistribution, without acknowledging that the consumer influences – and pays for – things without any direct consequence, or understanding, of their actions.

Will companies put up even greater resistance to an increase in PRN cost post-pandemic, when they will be struggling to recover?

Is it time to connect the consumer more closely to the circular economy in a more straightforward way – perhaps with VAT on excess packaging and pay-as-you-throw collection arrangements?

In any event, it will be unsustainable to implement a system that requires the consumer to pay three times: through the goods they buy; the extra charge by companies seeking to recover a PRN cost; and through their council tax for a service that bears no correlation to how much they throw out or how well they recycle.

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