

Transcript of 'Is Plastic Fantastic?'

Season 2, Episode 13, Transforming Tomorrow

[Theme music]

Paul: Today, it's the first episode in our miniseries about the Plastic Packaging in People's Lives project, or PPIPL for short.

In this episode we'll get an overview of everything it's doing from improvements in supermarket packaging and council waste management systems, to inspirational projects involving crisp packets and pea waste, and we'll find out why we should be digging around in our rubbish bins.

So let's get into our conversation with Alison Stowell and Maria Piacentini, the co-leads on the PPIPL project.

[Theme music]

Paul: Hello and welcome to Transforming Tomorrow, the podcast from the Pentland Centre for Sustainability in Business here at Lancaster University Management School. I'm Paul Turner.

Jan: And I'm Professor Jan Bebbington.

Paul: Jan, I want to take you on a whole new adventure, an adventure that's gonna take us, ooh, I'm gonna say six weeks.

Jan: That'd be great. What kind of adventure is this for the new year?

Paul: Well, I'm afraid it's not an adventure where you're spending six weeks traveling around the world and jollying it up. It's an adventure where we will be here in the podcast studio and we will be talking to people about a very important subject when it comes to sustainability.

Jan: And I'm really looking forward to it, 'cause we've got practitioners, we've got academics, and we've got a super big project that's been run out of Lancaster University Management School to make sense of. So, you better get us going, Paul. What are we gonna do?

Paul: We're gonna be talking for the next few weeks, all about plastics. If you can imagine, I'm Dustin Hoffman, uh, in The Graduate. I've got one word for you. Plastics.

Jan: What about plastic packaging?

Paul: That's two words, well done, you've, uh, figured that out. Yes. It's the Plastic Packaging in People's Lives project. It's a project that's been running out of Lancaster University, mainly in the Management School for the past few years, all about analysing people's attitudes and behaviours towards plastic packaging.

And over the next few weeks, we're gonna be talking all through the plastic supply chain from the manufacturer of plastic packaging, retail consumption, all the way through to disposing and recycling.

Jan: Well, do you wanna kick us off then on what the project is all about? And how was it thought about? How was it instigated? Where did it come from?

Paul: Well, I could do that, but I think we've got two people who can do that even better than me. And you know, I don't say that lightly.

We've got two guests who are the, the co-lead investigators on the Plastic Packaging in People's Lives project.

We're joined today by Dr. Alison Stowell and Professor Maria Piacentini. Hello both of you.

Alison: Hello.

Maria: Hi.

Alison: Hello.

Paul: First of all, let's get a little bit of information about yourselves and your background. We'll start with you, Maria. Can you tell us a little bit about yourself, where your expertise is?

Maria: Okay. Well, I'm a Professor of consumer behaviour in the Management School, and I am a consumer behaviour researcher, and I've been working in this area of academic work since the mid 1990s.

And probably the best way that I think about my own work and explain it to people is that I've always had an interest in understanding how consumers navigate or cope with challenging marketplaces.

So my early PhD research was looking at people living in low income, and how they managed to get access to healthy diets when they lived in context that this wasn't freely available in and there were various issues affecting them,

through to other contexts, such as looking at young people who choose not to drink within a context where excess of alcohol prevails.

And common to both of these and other projects I've looked at, I've always taken quite a sociological perspective trying to look at the interplay of complex cultural, social and historical factors at play.

So as co-lead of this project with Alison, I bring this strong discipline focus on consumers. So I'm very much thinking about consumers as citizens, people in their everyday lives, and trying to approach this as this complex, multifaceted problem of people navigating a complex and sometimes fierce, difficult marketplace where there's lots of obstacles in the way, that stop them doing this thing that we really want 'em to do, which is consume, use, reduce their plastic material usage.

Paul: And what about you, Alison?

Alison: I'm at the opposite end to Maria, so I would describe myself as an engaged social scientist. And my research sits in sustainability, but I would classify it in a new specialism, uh, called waste studies.

So I'm very much interested in post-consumption. And my research expertise spans complex wastes. So I'm interested, I, well, my PhD was studying electronic waste, you know, what happens to your computers when they get thrown away, and now more recently into plastics?

So I think I've always been interested in how a range of, you could call them stakeholders or actors, respond to the challenges of waste, whether that's companies, governments, civic society, individuals, and how when you bring these people together, you can develop solutions to the challenges we have with physical waste, but actually in particular how you can create inclusive solutions.

And more recently, um, what's mobilised on the agenda is circular solutions, um, and the circular economy as a response to overproduction and consumption.

So Maria looks at sort of the consumption and I, I, my interest is in post-consumption.

Jan: Well, that sounds like a match made in heaven, quite frankly, so...

Paul: [joking] ...do you think, I think it sounds like they're just gonna fight it all the time.

[General laughter]

Jan: Don't be making trouble, Mr. Turner. So how did you come about building this research project, and I, and I understand it's part of a programme of work...

Maria: ...yeah...

Jan: ...that the government funded at the same time...

Maria: ...yeah...

Jan: ...and so you are one of, uh, 10 big projects

Maria: ...that's right...

Jan: ...in there. So, so how did, how was this born? How was it conceived of between the magic, between your two disciplines?

Maria: So it is interesting. So if we take ourselves back five years to this call from UK Funding Council, UKRI, and there was this programme, research, enabling research in smart, sustainable, plastic packaging challenge. And there was 10 projects actually supported across the UK.

And a, a key factor was about tackling plastic waste in the UK. But really a key theme of it was partnering. Okay. So partnering with industry partners, 'cause as Alison says one of the key things that we're always thinking about as a solution, and that often resides in having partners involved.

So as a university, this came to our attention and, like what happens oftentimes somebody's approached and says, will you lead on this? You know, and that's what happened here. But straight away I could see that while there was a very strong consumer story and topic to investigate this really needed a multidisciplinary approach.

And Jan, you just did something often people don't do, you recognize that within business and management - it's multidisciplinary? 'Cause often people think, oh, bring the business studies person to a project or the management studies person to it. But actually we could see, well, this is about the supply chain. And the supply chain has actors from production right through to Alison's expertise and post consumption and sort of waste management.

So we thought straight away, we need to get this range of disciplines. I vaguely knew Alison, just, I mean, it's incredible really, 'cause Alison and I just knew each other to see around. We're in different departments, different discipline areas, but we just kinda hit it off very quickly. We got on well with a similar mind view, and I think the networks that I'm part of are quite unusual.

In consumer research, there's a network called Transformative Consumer research. Which is a global network, which is very much about impactful solutions and working with stakeholders. So we knew that I could do that side of things. We knew Alison with her industry background could definitely do that. So we were the core team and then we looked around and said, who's a supply chain person?

So we brought in one of our colleagues, Linda Hendry, to talk about supply chain. We brought in some other consumer experts and, and we also brought in a chemist, a material science expert. So recognising that we needed that ide of things in there. So I'm gonna pass over to you, Alison, for your sense of how it came about.

Alison: The only other thing I'd really add was when Maria sort of and I were having the conversations about the plastic project. The reason I like it is it sparks my interest, 'cause the reason I like complex waste is because of the skills and ingenuity that go into making these products.

So when you think of the invention of fossil fuel plastic, well fossil fuel derived plastics, and then you could look around everything you do and you can't not see plastics for all the complex products we had. I thought that this was a really great project to get involved in. Because, because whatever we, however we produce something, it has to be got rid of.

And for me there's that skills, um, tension between, you know, thinking about designing something to, if you like, the afterlife. So there's often been criticism in research about focusing on production and consumption and missing out that disposal part.

So I, I thought it was a really exciting project and especially for me. I like working in this cross and interdisciplinary space 'cause these problems are really challenging and I like having, being around people with different ideas and different ways of looking to resolve these problems.

Paul: So after you'd brought this whole team together then?

Maria: ...mm-hmm...

Paul: ...and I'm still not buying that they all get along, all these people from different disciplines...

Maria: ...[amused] mm-hmm...

Paul: ...you brought this whole team together. What questions were you looking to address as part of the Plastic Packaging in People's Lives Project? What, what issues were you hoping that you might be able to provide insight into and maybe provoke change around?

Alison: Well, there were quite a few questions, 'cause this project, um, as Maria's indicated in the end, we had 13 researchers on it with 11 partners. So there was different sets of work activities that went on in the project.

And I think our overarching question was how can we rethink the consumer attitude-behaviour gap to create real world impact on consumer and business behaviour across the circular supply chain?

So that was like the meta question. And how did we get to that question was to have some significant, if you like, mini-projects on work activities running underneath.

So the supply chain area, which was headed up by Linda Hendry, she was looking very much at what are the supply chain actors' perceptions of and subsequent responses to consumer attitude-behaviour gaps, and, and sort of exploring with supply chains some of the constraints of fundamental packaging change on supply chain actors. But all, all very much trying to sort of understand how they thought about sort of the consumer attitude-behaviour gap.

Now with um, James Cronin and Alex Skandalis, they headed up the, what we've called the consumption-work activities, and they worked with households and, um, various different, um, consumers and they were trying to investigate what barriers to knowledge there was influencing consumer decisions.

And as Maria sort of said about her background, they were also interested in the sort of historical, economic and culturally instituted factors that shape our choices or consumer choices and, and how consumers interacted with packaging, whether that was in the workplace, whether that was home, whether that was out shopping.

And for the waste dimension, which we'll refer to as post consumption, it was interrogating how we can enhance waste management in the post-consumer plastic packaging landscape. You do need to [laughs] have your teeth in to do that 'cause it's very much a tongue twister, the PPIPL project and what the sources, drivers and barriers and opportunities were for recyclability, reusability, and compostable packaging futures.

So those three areas, the pre-consumption, the consumption, and the post-consumption, um, fed into the overarching question we had about trying to make real world impact.

Jan: And central to that, and the way you've talked about it, is this consumer attitude-behaviour gap. And I'm sure our listeners will maybe have an inkling of what that means, but if you could explain that, that would be a really great starting point.

Maria: Mmm. I mean, the attitude-behaviour gap is used quite often when we talk about consumer behaviour in a number of contexts. But in this situation, it's really that gap between what we say we're going to do and then what we do, and the attitude part being our thoughts and feelings and everything we're thinking, rationalising.

But then the behavioural part is when it actually comes to it, and when it what, when it comes to it means isn't just simply the act of purchase, but it's kind of what happens when you go home and what happens in the households, et cetera. So it's that gap between what we say and think we want to do and then what we actually do.

And why does it exist? Well, it's there for a whole host of reasons. You know, we are busy people, so that's the first thing, isn't it? Time is a factor. We all often have really good intentions of what we want to do, but there's time involved, whether it be time to go and seek out and shop for these alternatives that you have to find, or time that goes wit, um, you know, when you have even plastics in the house and you want to, um, recycle 'em in good ways and you have to have the time to have your sorting in place and your washing, et cetera.

So there's things that are involved there. There's also a big factor about confusion and what does it mean? What? What is this material that we're talking...because we're basically talking about material that's so present in people's lives, and when you speak to some of our colleagues later in the series

they'll talk a bit more about this, but it's very present, plastic material. But it's confusing for people especially, and I've got a cup here, haven't I, with the lid on it.

And things have got multiple aspects to them, haven't they? Packaging. And so there might be bits that are hidden you can't see, and you don't quite know. And is this, is this code one, two, or four? What, what do I do here? You know, you're trying to follow the guidance, but it's not clear. And I think the really important thing that, this is second nature to me as a consumer behaviour person, but not often to industry, is that consumers are not a homogenous mass.

You know? There's so much heterogeneity, isn't there? So we're all different. And what are the factors that lead us to act differently? Well, of course, social class, what's available, our history, our backgrounds, what we know, who we trust. Where we, where we seek information, the media, confusion there. So there's so many factors in the mix that taken together, create this noise and get in the way.

And I think for us, what was really clear is this...multiple perspectives. So I, what I found intriguing when we started was, okay, you ask consumers about the attitude-behaviour gap, but we're also asking retailers about the attitude-behaviour gap. Um, I'm saying asking as a loose way of thinking, we are exploring it with them and we speak to producers about this, and you could say, well, why are they important?

But they're really important to understand the different frames of reference on this thing in order to ease it, find ways through and find these, um, holistic solutions. And we did come up with a whole set of recommendations.

And in some regards, there's no surprises. You know, communication's really important, right? Communication about the narratives, functions, usability, collaboration between the different parts of the supply chain, um, design. Ways to identify packaging.

So I said consumers find it difficult to go, what do I do with this? And what even is it? So identification, so there's very many aspects, but I think a key part is if we are to take seriously this bridging the gap, there needs to be a holistic approach taken to understanding the problem and then working together on solutions.

And we'll hopefully get a bit of a chance to even talk about that because that's part of we're continuing working with these partners to try and develop some good solutions.

Jan: While the context of this work was about plastic packaging, I would like to sort of, you know, come out into a broader, um, area entirely and ask you about the circular economy, 'cause that's something which is clearly related to this, but which might also be quite different.

So let's have a chat about the circular economy and, um, why it's a good idea and how waste is incorporated within that, that concept and that ambition.

Alison: I mean, that's, that's a really interesting question Jan and I, and I think in the UK context, the policy around the circular economy focuses on waste or secondary resources. It focuses on keep, I, keeping resources in use for as long as possible. And I looked this up actually, um, and the actual quote was keeping resources in use for as long as possible, extracting maximum value from them and minimizing the waste and pro... promoting resource efficiency.

Um, that hasn't changed with the change in government in the UK. The circular economy for me personally is much bigger than just dealing with waste. But the focus in the UK is on waste management and recycling. So I think this is a great agenda and I think our project illustrated sort of some of the challenges and some of the findings and recommendations can support this agenda.

But the one thing, before I move on to the ways in which that can happen, I think one thing we have to be mindful is that, um, plastics cannot be recycled indefinitely. I mean, they have to dissipate somewhere eventually.

So along with sort of getting on top of recapturing valuable resources back into production and consumption systems, there is a need to recognise that possibly we do need to sort of start driving changes and finding alternatives.

So our research then really did tie in with this agenda. You know, there was a solid evidence base for trying to co-create communications, if we just use plastics, um, and the circular economy for the moment to rethink the role of plastics, and help people understand how it's made, how it's designed, how it's used, how it's disposed of, and what it can be reused back into.

I know that you're going to be speaking to Claire Mumford, who was our Senior Research Associate on the waste management side, and Richard

Hudson from the Chartered Institute of Wastes Management, and I'm sure they can share some illustrations of how, um, HDPE milk bottles have the opportunity to be reused back into milk bottles, but some of the other plastics, unless it's clean and can be recaptured in certain ways, ends up maybe as park benches or in construction somewhere.

So it's really important that we have a communication sort of platform that explains these journeys so people can understand the stories around, um, plastics.

Our project sort of also aligned with the UK Plastic Pact, which was about reducing, eliminating plastic packaging and trying to shift to, um, more sustainable alternatives.

We think, you know, sort of the project that ties in with the circular economy because there is this idea of reduction. So we think that, you know, sort of some of the other agendas actually compete with the UK circular economy package statement, if you like, because they need to be complimentary to one another.

So it isn't an either or we recycle, it isn't an either or we prevent, it isn't an either or we find something compostable. You know, it, it has to be sort of driven with this idea in mind and, and, and circularity in mind that we are going to design things that are restorative and regenerative and also minimise the, the waste streams.

I think again, sort of talking about the complementarity, I think we also could, and, and our project findings allude to this, think about the principles of circularity, but also with some of the broader agendas like decarbonisation and Net Zero.

Some people can understand if we're making reductions in our carbon, as shorthand for addressing lots of other things, whether that's social justice, whether that's occupations, whether that's material reduction. So I think it's really important that, uh, or, or our research found that it was important to think about other agendas.

Again, you know, that our research advocates for waste prevention, you know, and trying to sort of champion some of the ideas around reuse and refill, uh, which there's lots of work going on around the UK to do it. You know, you see in supermarkets you can take containers and get um, them filled up with pasta

and, um, you know, sort of cleaning products. So there's those alignments there. We also highlighted with producers and brands to continue the work they're doing around labelling, so help the consumers, as Maria said, understand, you know, what packaging they have and how they can, uh, dispose of it.

There was activities for us as citizens or consumers to think about, um, that came out of the data where we need to think about purchase, and I think one of the most powerful questions for me throughout this project, and I didn't appreciate it at the start, is when you think about sort of resource use, the question we should all be asking ourselves is, is it necessary?

And that question is multilayered and complex because depending on who you are, whether you're a business, whether you're an individual, what level of affluence you have, will have a very different outcome. Um, and then there was sort of the recommendations around waste and resource management.

And we did start trying to call waste 'resources' in the project, but it was really interesting how everybody defaulted to the term waste, even though they wanted to talk about what we discard as the potential to be resources for driving back into the circular economy.

And these were sort of trying to shift this orientation and trying to introduce this language to households. Um, so when you put your recycling out, you're thinking about putting your resources out rather than your waste out, so that again, people can reframe and can take a little bit more, or have the potential to recognise why it's important to wash those containers out so that we can actually put them back into other products like those park benches or like those new milk bottles that, um, get sold on at the supermarket.

So I think this agenda is important. Um, but there's the, it, it's much bigger than just the waste area.

Paul: I think it's, it's really clear to see there, Alison, how this does all tie in with your disciplinary interests before you came into this project. I, I wonder with you, Maria, how does people tie in with your disciplinary interest and how does it build on them as well?

Maria: Yeah, so one of the things I was speaking about earlier was obviously being a consumer-focused person and the sociology of consumption, and one of the areas, I mean, there's a number of different theoretical areas I look at,

but one of them is social practice theory and thinking about how everyday behaviours, routines, and norms shape consumption and disposal of plastics.

So, um, so rather than focusing on the individual, you start to try to get a bigger picture. And from a social practice theory point of view, you look very much at that interconnection of the material themselves, um, cultural norms and meanings and the skills and competencies.

So thinking about the physical properties of plastics, and we talk about this a lot in each of the reports and aspects of the project, is how important, how important the actual material plastic is in terms of what it affords for people, what it gives them, and what they can do in their lives with it, which makes it so integral to many practices like packaging, like eating and hygiene.

It is really interesting to think about how that intersects with what we know in our norms and things, and as part of the project, the team, each year during the project, we all engaged in Plastic Free July, the initiative, it's a worldwide initiative and, and it was really interesting.

We kept diaries and blogs and we did a lot of things, and Alison talks about the difficulties of reuse and recycle, we all were doing this, washing our packaging at home and taking our pots in. But when you're, so if you decide you're going to engage in this practice of taking your own dish to the supermarket, to ask the butcher counter to put the mince in there, okay, so that's the practice, isn't it?

You've gone with this thing and you're trying to do it, but what comes before that is you have to dig out the material, the pot, you have to wash it, you have to sort it something, you have to make sure it doesn't contaminate other aspects of your kitchen, you have to store it somewhere. So you can start to see a number of different practices, washing, sorting, squashing, returning with it.

Then you've also got, got the interaction itself. You go to the butchers counter and you say, can you please reuse this? And they kind of look at you sceptically, even though we know, 'cause it says on their website that this is allowed, but still it's not institutionalised, it's not something that we do as a norm.

So you've got to contend with that. And your children being super embarrassed and going, mum, please, this is my own experience. Um, but this

one, this, this reappeared in the data, we saw this story, and then you go to the cash desk and your, your, your product looks different at the checkout. So you can imagine there's all these different aspects to it, that that's what we took this deep, deep approach to doing.

And then the other story that was my own story was, I'm from Glasgow, in case you didn't know, and we'd visitors down from Glasgow and my mom's pizza, the famous Nonna's pizza from Glasgow came down, but normally it comes wrapped up in cling film and everything. But, 'cause I was doing plastic free July, she wanted to help me, but this was the cultural part and the social, so she wrapped it in tea towels and things and was very carefully being very mindful of not invading on my plastic free practice.

And it just, when I reflected on it and wrote about it in the blog, and we see it cropping up in the data. Really reminds you how interconnected we are and also just this artefact with the pizza, Nonna's pizza's got big family histories, really important to me, but to get access to this in this way.

So it was, it's just one example, but it's the kind of thing, and I think what's really important is in practice theory, we talk about bundles of practices and interconnected practice and we see that cropping up. So that was one way. And I don't know, Alison, if you want to share anything about your own discipline and findings from it in relation to that.

Alison: Well, I mean, I think for me, when I think about my disciplinary interests, I mean, I, I just want everybody to look through, look at the world through the lens of waste.

Maria: Mmm.

Alison: Because I, I see it a bit like a detective story, you know, when you've seen those people rummaging in bins to get clues of where people have been, how they've spent the money. 'Cause for me, it's a mirror to who we are as individuals, organisations, and society at large.

So, I think what's really interesting too, and is sort of the hidden values, I mean, Maria's touched upon it with her perspectives on practice theory, but there are these hidden values that are associated to plastics. Um, and especially when we discard them, they represent different things, identities, occupations.

So this work for me, I just, you know, you'll never find a, a, a researcher more happy than rummaging around rubbish because I think everything we throw away, there's a story to be told and an infrastructure behind it.

Jan: I think that's a good time to encourage our listeners to take a wee bit of a look and see what's in their rubbish bags and, uh, yeah, so this is a really nice practical as well as academic, um, project and, uh, podcast for our listeners as well.

So I'm gonna sort of come back out further again. So from time to time I hear there's chatter that we're going to have a plastics treaty that's going to have some sort of the same standing as the Paris Agreement has for climate change and that the Global Biodiversity Agreement and Framework has for, for, for biodiversity in nature.

Am I right or have I heard mad things on the grapevine that aren't true?

Maria: Yes. So yes, there has been talk about this. And a couple of years ago, the UN Environment Assembly launched this effort to launch this plastic pollution treaty. And um, so in December 2020, 400 countries met because the goal had been to have this treaty in place by the end of 2024, which was fast approaching

And that was the fifth meeting and it was in Busan in South Korea and there were very high expectations of these sessions. No final agreement was reached, and the, the central tension is really around this idea of how do we enforce this treaty?

If we want to have a set of rules around plastic production through waste management, how do we enforce it? Do we have globally binding measures, which was what was advocated by the EU and the majority of nations? Or do you allow voluntary commitments, which was really favoured by a small minority of oil and plastic producing countries who had a preference for waste management over production cuts.

But what we've got to remember as a treaty such as this is effectively every voice has a veto because it has to be multilateral agreement. So that's why it's been turfed out in a sense. But there is hope, there's draft text for something to be revisited in 2025.

Alison: Well, I, I think what's really interesting is we do have somebody at Lancaster University working on it. Um, Dr. Alex Harrington, and she's in our law department, so she's been actually at these meetings.

Um, but I think actually what's really interesting about these is this expands plastics beyond supply chains into value chains. And because there's been a lot of dialogue with the treaties of how to include the informal workers in the waste sector, who do a lot to support our environment because they work on landfill sites, sorting and separating plastics, and that's part of their livelihood too.

So that's been actually another thing that's happened from the start of when these discussions happen through till 2024 of how, how do we make this plastic treaty an inclusive treaty as well. So there's the tensions around the, um, legally binding and voluntary, but there's also the, the tensions about thinking about the reach of where our plastic goes.

Jan: One thing I'd say if people are feeling like if we haven't made an agreement, we ought to sort of give up is that these things are iterative and they go on, and so you might remember last year we had a, a climate, um, conference of parties that didn't seem to go very well. Some things were agreed, lots of things were left unagreed and lots of people had to leave and so there wasn't a quorum, so they couldn't go on with it.

They are reconvening in March of 2025 to pick up the things that weren't agreed to work on it for the next one. So there's a sense in which, given these are really tricky and difficult, um, decisions to have to make, that they have to be unanimous, that people have interests, and countries have interests within the mix of it, I think they, they, they keep on going and I think as, as long as the they, uh, negotiation process isn't dead, we are still moving towards it, even too slowly, too late, whatever, we're still moving towards it.

Maria: Yeah. I think that's true.

Alison: Yeah, no, I was just gonna say, I mean, Maria alluded to this is coming, they are having another meeting in 2025 about this.

And you know, the positive thing is, is we are actually talking about it, right? And you've got, you've got, I think 95 countries are in agreement at present and that's quite a significant achievement.

Paul: Speaking of achievements, what do you think the biggest achievements have been from PPIPL? What have your biggest takeaways been, I suppose actually rather than achievements? What from the, the plastic packaging in people's eyes project. You've spent these years on it. It's worked with so many organizations, so many researchers. What are your biggest takeaways from it?

Alison: I think in three words 'it's complex'. [laughs]

Paul: 'It's complex'. Is that two, two and a half words. [Alison laughs]

I always wonder when you do word count mean 'it' counts as one...

Alison: ...'it is'...

Paul: ...but it's more than one word...

Jan: ...it is complex....

Paul: ...it's two and a half...

Alison: ...it is complex...

Paul: ...it is complex, there you go. I'll take, I'll take that as three words, definitely.

Alison: Um, and, and I think Maria's already alluded to that it does really require this holistic approach and um, I do love the American phrase that a professor in Switzerland uses David Bach, and he says, 'if you're not at the table, you're on the menu'.

And the reason I like that saying is because it, it, it reminds us the of the importance of having the right voices at the table. And that in our research includes the customer, it includes the designers of plastics right the way through to the people that are dealing with the recycling and trying to feed it back into this circular supply chain.

But I also think it reminds us that if we're on the menu or we are looking at the menu, then it's hard for us to create the right solutions. So we're often second guessing solutions. So again, it sort of reinforces the need of having this holism and having the right people there to talk about it. And I think our pilot projects really illuminated that as well.

So one of our pilot projects, we had data from the supply chain and households saying that consumers wouldn't accept imperfect packaging and the imperfect packaging was generated from using, um, recycled content in it.

And when we did the pilot at one of the retailers, um, Booths, who you will be speaking to later on, we found the, that to be incorrect.

You know, they were all willing to take the imperfect packaging because they cared about the environment. What they were concerned about was what happened in recycling. Whereas our other pilot with a, um, Lancaster City Council who you are also gonna be speaking to, um, later on in this series, they were having challenges encouraging households to recycle.

You know, our next steps are to get both Booths and Lancaster City Council together to try and come up with this communication package and get the right voices at the table, um, working with sort of Booths customer base too, to be able to create this communication narrative and this holistic sort of story around plastic packaging.

So I think, you know, those two pilots really sort of highlighted the importance of being at the table and not on the menu.

Paul: Are you at the table or on the menu, Jan?

Jan: Well, I, I saw Ffion, our producer, sort of shudder at that idea and her and I sort of glimpsed at each other, 'cause it's the first time I've heard the saying, I'm gonna have to give it some thought.

[General laughter]

I don't want to be on the menu or on the table. I don't know where I want to be, but it's pretty scary stuff.

Paul: Did, did you have a sudden worry that this was gonna turn into an episode all about cannibalism?

[General laughter]

Alison: No, no, no. It's all about plastic.

Paul: All about plastic, that's right. Well, that's been a really great introduction to the Plastic Packaging in People's Lives Project.

Thank you very much Alison and Maria.

Maria: Thank you.

Alison: Thank you Paul and Jan.

[Theme music]

Paul: Well, Jan, that's a good way to dive into a topic we're gonna be discussing for the next five weeks as well. All about plastics, and a very interesting set of conversations that I'm sure are gonna come up based upon that one.

Jan: One of the things I loved about that introduction is realising that, you know, the spark of the idea happened five years ago.

And so the, the amount of time it takes to write a proposal to get it funded, to get it up and running, and then to come to these really exciting conclusions is, is a long-term project.

But this project is hugely impactful because it partnered with real people doing real things in, in the real world. I, I know that I, I don't think either Maria or Alison aren't real, but you know what I mean.

It's a very applied, impactful project and I, I really like that kind of research and I think it's a hallmark of, um, sustainability in business research is to be engaged.

Paul: I was worried we were going back to mass hallucinations then, that Alison and Maria aren't real people. But yes, the, the fact that there is, yeah, practical impact, practical application, and that they can already see how this has been applied through some of the organisations that they've been working through.

We've mentioned that we will be speaking to Lancaster City Council and Booths supermarkets in the coming weeks, and we'll see from their perspective the impact that this project has had on them.

But you can just hear from talking to Alison and Maria, the fact that all the organisations they've worked with, it's had some kind of impacts.

Jan: The other thing I picked up on, 'cause I knew it happened at some month, but I was never sure which month is this Plastic Free July. And, um, maybe, uh, because it's a new year and I have New Year's resolutions in my mind, um, I think I'll give it a go this year. I think it'll be really hard, but I think it would be a really good exercise to see how my July looks.

Paul: Yeah, I can't quite imagine being able to do it in my house in, in as much as I have children who everything they play with is made of some kind of plastic or however. And I mean, it's, it's not disposable plastic, which is more what Plastic Free July is aimed at. It's not suggesting that all plastic in your life.

Should disappear. I might suggest that much as when we spoke to uh, JB about sand, that if there was no sand then we wouldn't have houses, et cetera. If there was no plastic, our houses if still in existence would probably be falling down around the edges and wouldn't have windows and things like this.

Yeah. So you know that plastic is here, there and everywhere, but being able to cut it down and being able to analyse when it comes to packaging what you are buying and why you're buying it and if there is an alternative, like Maria's mum bringing down a pizza wrapped in tea towels rather than wrapped in layers of clingfilm.

Jan: Yeah, I thought that was heartwarming, that her mum was bought into Plastic Free July as well, and trying to, to modify what she could do in order to make it all work.

Paul: Yeah, so it's gonna be really interesting. So we are gonna be going over the next few weeks. We're gonna be talking about supply chains and production of plastic packaging.

We're gonna be talking about consumption and how consumer attitudes and consumer society shapes plastic use and behaviours. We're gonna be talking to Booths, the supermarket, on how consumers and their customers have reacted to changes and how they're looking at what they might do.

We're going to be talking about disposal practices and waste management, and we're gonna be talking to Lancaster City Council about what they do when it comes to dealing with the plastic waste that is created.

Jan: That's brilliant. I can't wait for the journey. And for our listeners, we will have the, the reports and the link to the PPIPL website on our podcast website so you can go back and read material for yourself as well.

Paul: You can even do that before we have the next episode. So when we will be talking to Linda Hendry all about supply chains and plastic packaging production.

[Theme music]

Until then, thank you very much for listening. I'm Paul Turner.

Jan: And I'm Professor Jan Bebbington.

[Theme music]