

exemplarnet.org.uk

ExeMPLaR Briefing Note:

REGIONAL AND LOCAL INITIATIVES IN THE SOUTH WEST



Dr Kerry Burton and Professor Joanne Smith
Department of Psychology
University of Exeter

April 2020

Contents

	Page
Introduction	3
Regional and Local Citizen-led Initiatives	4
Methods	5
Place Based Initiatives in the Southwest	6
Motivation to Act	7
Actions and Impacts	8
Insights and Future Directions	9

This project was funded by the UKRI EPSRC Plastic Research and Innovation Fund 2019 – 2021

Cite this report as: Burton, K. and Smith, J. (2020) Exemplar Briefing Note: Regional and Local Initiatives in the South West: University of Exeter

Introduction

This briefing note provides an overview of research examining the growth of local schemes for sharing, repairing and re-use of items and how we can consider their contribution to a regional circular economy, for plastics and beyond.

ExeMPlaR Project

The **Exeter Multi-disciplinary Plastics Research** hub is an 18-month project funded by UKRI through the Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council (EPSRC). The project brings together 21 researchers from across the University of Exeter. The initial 18-month programme will address both the causes of the problems and efforts to solve them, rather than just treating the symptoms. This research effort connects technical solutions, human behaviours, social, environmental and economic systems with circular economy principles. In this project we will:

1. Work with social and technical innovators to establish pathways to closed-loop systems.
2. Establish plastic flows and loads present in the South West.
3. Identify key problems with plastics within the South West.
4. Establish motivations, barriers and opportunities to taking action on plastics and adopting circular economy principles.
5. Co-produce a theory of change to be used by civil society groups to create change at the local and institutional level.

Plastics, a growing problem

3.8 billion metric tonnes of plastic have entered the environment since 1950 and oil based plastic production is rapidly accelerating, with the packaging, construction, and fashion industries as the primary users. Plastic waste is also accelerating, to more than 3 million metric tonnes per year, of which 79% will be discarded, 12% incinerated, and 9% recycled (Jambeck et al 2015). The environmental and social impacts of plastic waste and pollution are both local and global.

Toward a Circular Economy for plastic

Unsustainable resource and waste management practices are linked to the current economic reliance on extractive and linear processes (take, use, dispose). In addition, the need to transition toward low carbon economies means that the move to a circular (regenerative) economy is gaining currency amongst policy makers and grassroots stakeholders alike. A circular economy adopts a whole system approach, limiting resource extraction and eliminate unnecessary waste (Ellen MaCarthur Foundation). The transition toward a circular, closed loop, system requires both technical and social changes:

"The 3 Rs of the future require us to take a whole lifecycle approach: re-inventing at the design stage, re-thinking a product's use phase and re-defining its end of life" (WRAP 2015).

Regional and Local Citizen-led Initiatives

Within the wider ExeMPlaR project, the aim of this research was to identify community-led groups and initiatives actively involved in the reduction of plastics. The objectives were to establish the core motivations of these groups and identify any opportunities and barriers they face when trying to enact change.

Regional and Local Initiatives:

- ✓ To establish motivations of groups
- ✓ To identify activities undertaken by groups;
- ✓ To establish barriers faced by groups;
- ✓ To identify regional 'change makers' and their roles;
- ✓ To establish and work with a competency group, made up of regional stakeholders, to co-produce a theory of change for the shift from extractive linear economy to regenerative circular economy

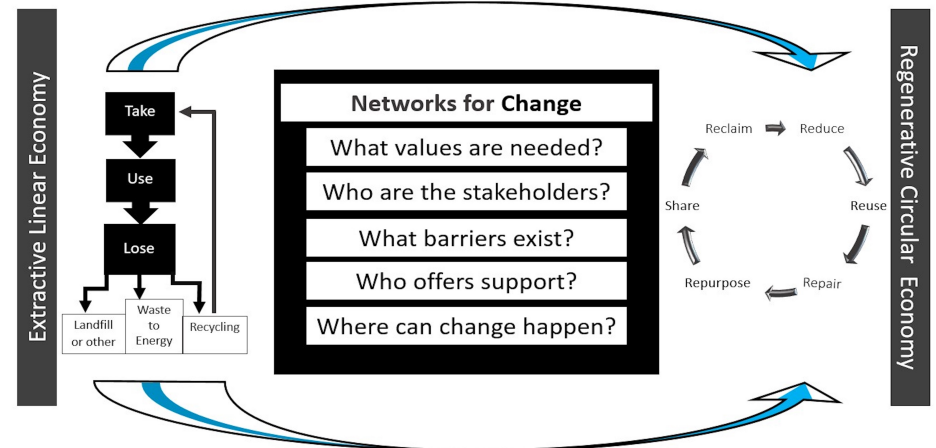
Fig 1: Local initiatives in the region (interactive map on exemplar.net.org)



Theory of Change:

Co-producing a theory of change is central to the ExeMPlaR project. We know what we need to move away from (the linear economy) and where we need to be heading to (a circular economy) but we need a better understanding of the factors that help or hinder the transition. Using a networks for change framework, this research will work with stakeholders to consider *how* aspects of social change (the central box in Fig 2). The social transition to a circular economy will involve new social practices and changes in individual behaviour, so a better understanding of motivations, barriers, and support networks is crucial.

Fig 2: Theory of change, co-producing pathways to local and regional circular processes



Methods

This phase of the research was undertaken between July and September 2019. The main objectives of this phase was to identify the number place-based groups and initiatives that are actively working toward plastics reduction in Cornwall, Devon, and Somerset, their motivations, impacts, and networks. Here we present the main methods used for this phase, with key findings presented on the following pages.

Methods:

Identifying key stakeholders and networks:

A stakeholder workshop was held at the University of Exeter in July. The workshop had 29 participants, representing key regional actors, including Local Authorities, the Environment Agency, and Keep Britain Tidy, alongside community representatives involved in plastic reduction initiatives. Adopting the concept of ‘networks for change’, participants (in groups) mapped key stakeholders (from international policy makers to individual consumers) and their motivations, values, barriers, and opportunities .

Identifying active groups:

Initial scoping was undertaken during August 2019. This adopted snowballing from information given by key stakeholders, project partners, and workshop data. In addition to this, two major networks, Surfers Against Sewage and Transition Towns Network, have databases of affiliated groups. We studied the public profiles of each group for evidence of current activity and impacts.

Identifying motivations, activities, and impacts:

Websites and public profiles of groups that demonstrated evidence of current activity were then analysed. We examined the landing pages, ‘about’ sections, and public events listings, to identify:

- ✓ **Stated and implied motivations and goals;**
- ✓ **Actions and activities;**
- ✓ **Impacts.**

In addition to textual analysis (content and discourse), visual imagery was also analysed to give further insights into how groups represented issues and actions around plastics. In both text and visual analysis, we examined how groups framed the problem of plastic, acted on the problem. More than 300 initiatives, with a stated aim to reduce plastics, were identified. For many of the groups, plastic was the primary focus, while for others their action on plastics was part of a wider focus on environmental or sustainability concerns. Some were single issue, for instance reusable nappies. For analysis, we chose groups that demonstrated an active commitment and had an established public profile.

The Emergence of Place-Based Initiatives in South West England

The South West region has a strong connection with environmental movements, with both Surfers Against Sewage and the Transition Towns movement starting in Cornwall and Devon. There are more place-based local initiatives addressing plastic within the South West than any other UK region.

Emerging landscape of plastics initiatives:

Most initiatives that we analysed started within the last two years. As Fig 2 illustrates, there has been a substantial rise in activity associated with formal community initiatives since 2017. The temporal graph shows the year that current groups started. There are two ‘peaks’: 20 groups have been active since 2008. All twenty are members of the Transition Town Network, many of whom started as Local Agenda 21 groups (initiated after the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio) and joined the international network when it started in 2008. The Transition Town initiatives have a broad sustainability remit, based on “communities coming together to reimagine and rebuild our world” (TTN website), which emerged in response to the concept of ‘peak oil’ and now cites the circular economy as a core principle. The second peak in the graph shows groups that have attained ‘Plastic Free Community’ certification, a scheme run by Surfers Against Sewage. The remit of the scheme is “uniting communities in the fight against single-use plastics and throwaway culture”(SAS website). In total, 145 groups from the region have joined the scheme, and 35 have taken local action to meet the objectives necessary to be awarded Plastic Free Community status. In addition to these international networks, local (district/authority/county) development schemes, such as the Community Action Groups network in Teignbridge and Mid-Devon, offer support to groups.

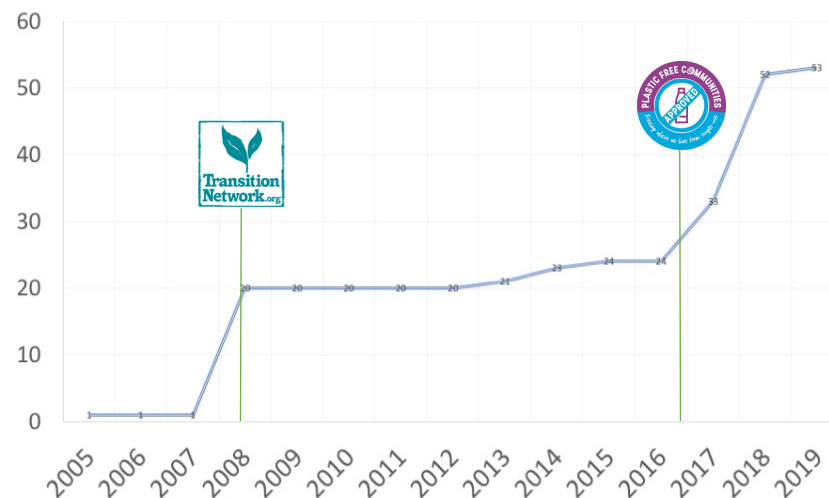


Fig 2: temporal graph showing rise in regional initiatives

Networks	Plastic Free Communities Certified	Transition Towns
Cornwall	13	6
Devon	17	8
Somerset	5	6

Table 1: Key networks for plastic free initiatives (November 2019)

Motivations and Goals: from the 'Blue Planet effect' to circular citizens

Across the South West place-based initiatives, motivation for action is primarily split between two key issues: marine pollution and sustainable resource use (inc. waste management). In addition to environmental concerns, place, political-economics, and local socio-economic processes play a role in motivating action. Media focus on the issue of plastic, particularly its role in marine pollution, is cited as a motivating factor by many initiatives, with 70% of sites analysed referencing scenes shown during the BBC series Blue Planet II. All quotes are taken from initiative website landing pages.

“Local businesses, tourism and of course our beaches, wildlife and marine life will all benefit, and it will give the whole community the opportunity to join in and do something meaningful to tackle the plastic pandemic. Last Autumn’s popular ‘Blue Planet 2’ series highlighted the impact of our plastic addiction on marine birds and wildlife in the most remote parts of the world, but we don’t have to look far from home to see its impact here too.” Plastic Free Kingsbridge (Est 2017)

“Since the awareness jolt brought about by David Attenborough and Blue Planet II the group has decided to focus on plastics for campaigning as the key issue.” Plastic Free Totnes (Est 2018)

“We can collectively celebrate successes so that everyone knows how we as a town are taking positive action to protect our #BluePlanet.” Plastic Free Perranporth (Est 2017)

“Our mission is to protect and improve our environment through community-led action to combat plastic pollution. We aim to achieve this by helping people to recognise the relevance and value of the environment to their lives; to see and experience first-hand the impact of plastic pollution on nature; and to support good choices in purchasing, use and disposal of plastics, as we move to a more sustainable community.” Plastic Free North Devon

“The objectives of the Proper Job Resource Centre are the protection and preservation of the environment by the promotion of waste reduction, re-use and recycling and advancing education of the general public about all aspects of waste generation, waste management and waste recycling. We aim to educate, help and inspire people to live more sustainably “a community business committed to principles of sustainability and helping to create jobs”” Proper Job Community Resource Centre (Est 1993)

“Sustainable Crediton's mission is to help people in Crediton and the local area to lead more sustainable lifestyles and work towards a carbon neutral future...We see a positive future where people value and respect the environment and understand the need to conserve the natural world and its finite resources. Our Goal: Crediton to be a zero waste town by 2050.” Sustainable Crediton (Est 2008).

“The project enables local people to borrow items at nominal cost so that they don’t have to buy them for themselves. Our aim is to support a more sharing community, allowing people to connect with each other and share things they may need just once in a while, which also reduces our impact on Earth’s precious resources.” Share Shed Totnes (Est 2017)

“TeX helps to create sustainable communities by recycling, reusing and repurposing new and used textiles. Mainly working with industry waste and creating a circular economy model we can bring benefit in four main areas to Cornish communities ; Education, Employment, Environment and Engagement.” TeX Textile Repurposing (Est 2017)

Actions and Impacts: removing, reducing, reusing, sharing, and repairing.

We are collating activities related to plastics reduction that are emerging from initiatives. The focus is on activities and initiatives that are framed as addressing plastic or promoted by 'plastic free' groups. The actions range from dealing plastic pollution at the end point, to more systemic shifts that are key to a circular economy and focus on eliminating and avoiding waste through reducing, reusing, repurposing, repairing, sharing. The emergence of new and revived social practices sit alongside an emerging vocabulary, including plogging and swishing.

Beach Cleans and Paddle Patrols	Refill scheme and App	Upcycling workshops for clothes	Scrap Stores	Secondhand shops (charity and preloved)	Freecycle (inc doorstep 'take for free')
Carrying keep cups and water bottles	Beach reuse boxes for buckets, spades, and body boards etc.	Local food networks	Zero waste veg boxes	Toy Libraries	Zero Waste Shops – static and mobile
Plastic bag charge	Community 'give and take' stalls	ACTIONS AND IMPACTS ◆ End point actions ◆ Transitional actions ◆ Systemic actions	Nappy Libraries	Community bulk buying schemes	Public Water Fountains
Plogging (jogging plastic clean-up)	Packaging swap hub (for bubble wrap etc)		Tool Libraries	Repair Cafes	Library of Things
Fishing Net collection bins and dive teams.	Festivals and sports grounds replacing single use plastic with reusable glasses and Water Bars	Plastic Free Periods	Textile Reuse Networks	Restart Parties	Community recycling centres for household goods.
Terracycle collection points (informal collecting of hard to recycle packaging)	Sharing patterns for DiY cloth veg bags, sanitary pads, wax wraps etc.	Zero Waste and Plastic Free Facebook Groups	Upholstery workshops for furniture	Plastic Free Schools	Micro-businesses, local shampoo bars, reusable sanitary pads, eco detergent refills.
Mass Unwraps (at Supermarkets etc.)	Plastic Free hotels and campsites.	Plastic Free Christmas Markets	Milk kiosks	Plastic Free Farmers Market	Swishing – clothes swaps

Insights and future directions

Communities across the South West are acting on plastic, through a diverse range of initiatives. This active and dynamic landscape and one that frequently references the circular economy as a goal. These citizen-led actions at the local level will be important in the transition toward a circular economy. This first phase of research, on regional initiatives, concentrated on identifying motivations, actions, and impacts. Here, we outline some key insights and future directions.

Creating opportunities for change:

The circular economy is referenced by many of the initiatives as a pathway to reducing plastic waste and pollution. However, there is divergence when it comes to information and action. Many of the initiatives are working to their own interpretation of a circular economy, resulting in large amounts of information, which can make change difficult to negotiate. Some initiatives manage this well, but others may be creating changes that are no more sustainable than those they are seeking to avoid. For instance, some alternatives to single use plastic present difficulties to waste management processes.

ExeMPLaR will continue working closely with stakeholders to establish local and regional pathways that help to embed regenerative circular economy principles with local action.

Cultivating the motivation for change:

Systemic change will necessitate new social practices. Many of the initiatives in the South West are motivating people to adopt new social practices or revive old ones, such as sharing and repairing.

In further examining motivations for individual and social action, ExeMPLaR research will better understand the social conditions that support systemic change.

Increasing the capacity for change:

Leadership has an important role in regional capacity building, particularly through knowledge exchange and networking. Initiatives in South West England benefit from affiliation to local, regional, and national networks. Where Local Authority support exists, for example the Community Action Group network, initiatives can access development and support.

Through ExeMPLaR we will be examining the role of these 'change makers' and the contributions that they make to circular economy transitions. We will share our findings and work with stakeholders to design appropriate interventions.

Join the conversation

The ExeMPlaR website is a resource for those involved and/or interested in the circular economy for plastics in the South West. The website operates as a platform for state-of-the-art information, knowledge sharing and discussions (through thematic Hubs), events listings, and webinars.

Please join the conversation at: exemplarnet.org.uk

References:

Jambeck, J.R., Geyer, R., Wilcox, C., Siegler, T.R., Perryman, M., Andrady, A., Narayan, R. and Law, K.L., 2015. Plastic waste inputs from land into the ocean. *Science*, 347 (6223), pp.768-771.

WRAP (2015) Resource Revolution: Creating the Future <http://www.wrap.org.uk/sites/files/wrap/WRAP-Plan-Resource-Revolution-Creating-the-Future.pdf>