



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. Our catalogues are now sent out in paper not plastic, our Essential Toilet Tissue wrapping is fully compostable, our own brand Herbal Tea bags are individually plastic-free, as is our Bulk Pasta range. 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 where possible, and return the shrinkwrap used to secure palletised deliveries to our warehouse, for collection by a specialist recycling facility.

One upshot of the increased public concern around plastic waste is a growing trend toward plastic-free retail. Part of the Essential Co-operative, our retail outlets Harvest Bath and Harvest Bristol have offered a popular re-fill section since 1971. Essential offer a variety of products in bulk sizes, and are a supplier of the nation's favourite zero-waste shops, including Earth Food Love, Totnes; The Clean Kilo, Birmingham; Incredible Bulk, Cornwall; Preserve & Zero Green in Bristol.

Essential is committed to the protection of the environment and to sustainable food systems. Efforts to source eco-friendly, fit for purpose packaging for our own retail packs has been a never-ending quest. 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, but – now for the bad news! - still not suitable for most of our goods, since packaging must be strong, tamper-proof and durable enough to outlive the shelf life of the product. Cellophane for example is made of wood pulp, which sounds good but is a lot more porous than plastic film. This reduces shelf-life significantly, leading to increased food waste – another big factor in food production that we want to avoid. Plus, the edges of cellophane packaging are still heat-sealed with plastic, which render it non-compostable. We also looked into corn starch alternatives to plastic, but unfortunately the corn starch used 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.

Polypropylene (type 5 plastic) is what our pre-packs are made from. 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 to expand this capability.

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