

With recycling rates being questioned and quality under the microscope, **the Loop** talks to Clarissa Morawski, Managing Director of the Reloop Platform, about some of the hot button issues facing local authority waste teams today

INTERVIEW

Return with interest

Producer responsibility, recycling measurements, deposit return schemes... These were just some of the issues on the agenda at the LARAC conference this year – and they are at the heart of Clarissa Morawski's work as Managing Director of the Reloop Platform.

Brussels-based Reloop, which was co-founded by Morawski and officially launched in March 2015, is a small organisation with an international outlook, focused on promoting a circular economy for resources.

Reloop lobbies governments on five key subjects: mandatory recycled content, reusable packaging, improving recycling calculations, improving sorting technologies and the currently divisive concept of deposit return schemes (DRS).

The journey towards this point was clear for Morawski, who has for the vast majority of her 25-year career been Principal of waste management consultancy firm CM Consulting – a role in which she has continued despite relocating to Europe from her native Canada three years ago to set up Reloop.

It was an auspicious time to launch the platform, with waste and recycling experiencing unprecedented levels of public and political engagement. Images of ocean plastic waste first captured the collective imagination, spurring a rising interest in recycling – and people have been further

fired up by news that their carefully recycled waste may in fact be part of the problem.

Only recently, the Environment Agency announced an investigation into fraud in the UK's recycling industry, an investigation that could call the UK's recycling rates into question,

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It's a forever evolving system, and municipalities have to be open to that evolution

with accusations that more waste is being recorded as recycled by exporters than is actually being recycled. "It seems to be happening all over," Morawski admits, highlighting similar occurrences in Canada, where the Canadian Broadcasting Company is questioning the "secrecy behind a lot of the data" on recycling, including the government's reported recycling rates.

A significant part of Morawski's work with Reloop is to look into ways to measure recycling rates more accurately, asking whether the weight of material leaving sorting facilities to be recycled is representative of the weight of material that is actually being recycled.

Contamination – it's the buzzword in the recycling world that keeps gathering momentum, with more and more countries following

China's lead and implementing restrictions on the import of low-quality recycle. And it's a key reason why rates are being overstated: "The material that gets shipped from sorting facilities does not represent what is actually getting recycled, because it contains a variety of things

of the material just prior to reprocessing, rather than the weight of the material exiting the MRF. This is complicated, however, as many jurisdictions will not be able to measure this data so precisely, especially when waste is shipped abroad for recycling.

Therefore, as Morawski explains, the alternative "is to measure the output of sorters and MRFs, and then apply a loss rate", based on the type of material being recycled and the method by which it was collected, in order to achieve more accurate accounting for recorded recycling rates.

When this approach is implemented, with recycling rates adjusted for yield losses, those recycling rates are in most cases going to drop as they become more accurate. This is significant for the UK; many councils rely on MRFs to sort recyclables, where there are contamination issues due to collecting non-target materials, as well as cross-contamination of recyclables following compaction during collection. In a way, Morawski contends, the public are "being green-washed to think that some jurisdictions have such high rates when in actuality they're 25, 30, 40 per cent lower".

Against this backdrop, governments in the UK are now exploring the potential to shift more of the burden of recycling back onto producers instead of councils, through the introduction of a DRS.

Morawski notes that opposition to a DRS from



retailers and producers “is starting to wane a little bit”, with Coca-Cola coming out in favour of the concept after previously opposing it. Mattoni, the Czech Republic’s largest beverage producer, has also said it would like to see a DRS introduced. But some in local government are wary of a DRS encroaching on (and diverting revenue away from) existing kerbside collection systems.

Morawski, however, is keen to highlight how it might not be such a bad thing for local authorities – and that it might not result in a loss of revenue at all.

“If you were to look at the total cost associated with collecting material via a municipal recycling system, the only material that actually nets out being a profit centre for that system is the aluminium can.” She contends both PET and glass cost more to collect and process than the revenue the recycled material brings in.

While acknowledging that fees from processors could go up due to a change in the composition of material provided, research collated by Reloop from 27 studies from around the world into DRS impacts – available on the Reloop website – suggests that there could actually be potential savings for local authorities in the region of millions of pounds.

“A perfect example was in the city of Toronto, when they introduced a deposit system on liquor glass, which

is the vast majority of glass,” Morawski explains. “A couple of MRFs had to reopen the contracts, renegotiate the processing and the fee went up, but the city of Toronto said that because they ran so many fewer tonnes through the MRF they ended up paying them less money for it anyway.”

A change in kerbside composition could bring

disposal could reach over £6m, while up to £9.2m could be saved on treatment and management costs.

The DRS Morawski would like to see would involve smaller businesses having the ability to opt out, while larger organisations could co-locate returns centres, for instance in a shared parking lot. The ideal DRS, she says, should cover a wide range of

management of waste that a local authority should really be doing is wet waste and garden waste... Everything else in a perfect world should be managed by producers. Maybe they’re paying municipalities for their services, but municipalities shouldn’t have to bear the burden on this task.”

In addition, the material lost to a deposit return scheme could free up space for local authorities to tackle other recyclable materials. “This is what I always say to municipalities: ‘If you have capacity and you’re worried about stranded assets, recognise that there is a long way to go to reach our recycling targets, there’s a lot more material that can be put in the box’.

“It’s a forever evolving system, and municipalities have to be open to that evolution, and recognise that if they can have some of the burden lifted off them, then they should jump on the opportunity. It’s always weird to hear municipalities fighting deposits... They’ve been convinced that it’s going to be bad for them but when you look at the evidence, it isn’t.”

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Councils should jump on the opportunity to have some of their burden reduced

other, unexpected benefits, Morawski states, such as RCVs carrying less material and thus being able to travel further – which could enable councils to further optimise their routes, or even cut down the number of vehicles used. Moreover, litter clean-up costs could go down in the long run if more commonly-littered items are diverted into a DRS – and a 2017 report by Zero Waste Scotland stated that savings on residual waste

materials, potentially including Tetra Pak cartons and coffee cups – though to limit the scheme to on-the-go items in order to avoid stepping on local authority toes (as has been suggested by waste management company SUEZ) would be a “bad idea”, as there is no clear definition of what ‘on-the-go’ refers to, which could contribute to confusion for users.

“At the end of the day,” Morawski says, “the only