

CONTEXT: Interviews conducted as part of an investigation into the barriers to, and opportunities for, achieving Circular Synthetics. Research was funded by Business of Fashion, Textiles and Technology Creative Research & Development Partnership (BFTT CRDP—£5.5 million) led by the University of the Arts London, part of the UK Creative Industries Clusters Programme (CICP) funded by the Industrial Strategy Challenge Fund, and delivered by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) on behalf of UK Research and Innovation.

Interview ID: BFTT-WP5-160620-09

Interviewee: Sorting facility manager, charity

**1: Interviewer**

**2: Interviewee**

**1:** I'll start with the questions then. Would you be able to tell me a little bit about the background of [redacted] in relation to textile waste, and also your role within [redacted] to begin with?

**2:** Yes, sure. [redacted] we call it. The plant that I'm saving now opened in 1974, and it was opened in conjunction with [redacted] Council for all sorts of recycling. It wasn't just textiles, it was collecting milk bottle tops for the aluminum, and that kind of thing. There was all sorts of different types of waste it collected. Then there was a report written by [redacted] that basically said the other things were not profitable, that the practical side of it was the textile waste.

That's what we concentrated on, and basically, we've been sorting our own rag in a variety of ways ever since. We've moved several times. The last time we moved wasn't of our own volition, [redacted]. Where we are now is-- Won't quite call it state-of-the-art, but it's very modern, it's much more modern than quite a lot of textile merchants.

**1:** What's your role within the organization?

**2:** I started with [redacted] 22 years ago. Obviously, I was a small child. I started actually as a trainer, and then-- I came on a five-month contract, but you get caught up by [redacted]. I came as part of a training career path, then just thought, "I don't want to do that, I just want to stay here." I was an area manager, then for the last ten years, I've managed the production side of here. Now, I'm actually the site manager over here with a colleague who jointly site-manages it with me, but he looks after the logistics transport side of things.

**1:** Would you be able to just go into a bit more detail of what the precise processes are that you do within this plant?

**2:** Yes, sure. Anything that hasn't sold in an [redacted] shop in the entire country for whatever reason, it might be just that it's the size 8, and the only person that liked it was my size so it wouldn't fit him. It could be a perfectly good garment or it might be absolutely dire, but anything that doesn't sell comes here. We have two production lines. I'm just thinking if I can-- Can you see it?

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**1:** Wow. Tilt it down a little bit, tilt it down a tiny bit because all I can see-- Oh yes, look at that. Wow.

**2:** Basically, as we have three production lines, two running most of the time, and they pull off for other [redacted] shops. We have some [redacted] shops that have customers, but not donors. We have some that are very very niche. We have one in Manchester that's a originals kind of retro shop, we pull off to those. We have our own online shop that you can get through to the main [redacted] websites, we pull off for that. Then we pull off for the festivals. Obviously not this year, but normally, we'd be packing our wellies and everything now ready to go. We'd actually be downloading, we'd be getting ready to go to [redacted]. We do things like that. We find all the stuff for that here.

Then anything we can't sell in our own shops, again, will get made into either recycling grades or it will be sold to a sister company that we have in Africa, in Senegal as what's known as light clothing. When you're talking to other collectors or recyclers, that bit of it is very much like a typical recycler would do. The difference that we have is this pulling out what would be called the gems to go back into the [redacted] network.

**1:** That's really interesting because you couldn't do that in an automated way, could you? The expertise of your sorters is quite important.

**2:** It is. In fact, that's a really interesting point. When we were at the place that burnt down, it was much more automated, everybody pulled things off a conveyor belt of a line. When it burned down, in order to keep people in jobs and things, we got actually trestle tables, things like that, and got people sorting by hand. Our sister company in Senegal complained because we were taking all the gems out, because we're seeing every item.

What we have here is we have a beginning of the belt, what we call podiums where somebody will stand and they will-- A virtually table saw, but anything they don't want, they'd shift down a suit, and it goes on a conveyor to the bin where start pulling out the recycled, which is the automated bin.

You are totally right there actually. To get the most maximum benefit out of it for [redacted], we need to hand sort it to start off with.

**1:** That's very interesting. The kind of grades that you are recycling into I'm presuming are like rag grade, stuffing grades.

**2:** Yes.

**1:** Do you have a rough idea of what kind of fraction the recycling grade is versus the reusable?

**2:** Not off the top of my head, but it's something I could find. The reusable grade is very- In terms of what we use for the shops and things like that is really small because bear in mind, it's already been to the shop, so we're pulling out again. That is probably between 1% and 3%.

**1:** They're quite small.

**2:** The biggest grade is what's known as light clothing. It's what we would send to Africa, that's the biggest grade.

**1:** The residual recycling, what's the motivation for continuing to process that? I'm presuming it's not particularly economical.

**2:** No, it isn't, but even if we give it away free, it's better than it being incinerated.

**1:** It's like a responsibility?

**2:** Yes. There's two things really. It's one, we don't want to incinerate something that can be used in some way whatsoever be it. Now a lot of hours goes into it that flocking between the springs in your bed, a lot of it goes into that. We have a major manufacturer just down the road, a few miles away, hence one of the reasons why we're here. Originally, it was in Huddersfield because it was packed the head of the shoddy industry. Now, obviously, that's gone but there is still bedding manufacturers all based all around here. We supply them. I'd rather we do something like that than just be burned. Obviously, I'd much rather it be burned than it goes into landfill but the other side of it is even if we give it away free. If we burn it, it costs us 125 tons to actually have it taken away and burnt. While it may cost us nothing, well, it's not bringing us an income. It's not costing us anything. Like you say, the green side of it is, if we can do something with it, then let's do something with it.

**1:** Yes, perfect. Okay, great. The next question, I'm going to ask you to think specifically about synthetics. I don't know how much of a part of your throughput that is, but if that's what we're looking at, I'm just wondering what your anecdotal experiences are of the synthetics that come through your hands?

**2:** They always had it to do something with, in terms of in the recycling world. One of my huge bugbears is onesies. That once you get down to that level of synthetics, to put it through heat rollers becomes a problem, so people don't want them. Things like, when people get really excited that they've made a fleece out of plastic bottles, yes, that's great. We've reused them at one point, but the actual then once you've fed up of your fleece, doing something with it proves to be an impossibility because it's not even a fabric you can unravel or anything. They can be a problem. On the other side of it is a vintage polyester dress will last forever and provided they're still in fashion, they'll be worn. The more natural fabrics are easier to recycle. Again, having said that, cotton, of course, environmentally is not a good thing at all, but it's that, isn't it?

**1:** Yes, of course. Yes. That's really interesting. I think I've got your contact actually through Warren, again, I think it was [redacted] who recommended that we speak to you. You've obviously been engaging with the chemical processing. Can you explain a bit about the motivation for that and how you see that as a part of your future?

**2:** I think once it becomes much more mainstream than what it is now, it's the way to go. I think it will change the shape of textile recycling. Being as we started very

innovatively in 1974. We want to carry on being innovative. It's keeping in touch with people like [redacted]. [redacted] as well over in Sweden.

Then another company, I've just can't remember the name now. This is because I've been on furlough and I now come back into it. Estonian and Finnish firm, who were looking at making, the stuff that you'd make stood walls out of, that kind of thing, but make that out of reused textile fibers and things. Anything like that, we're really keen to try and do something with.

**1:** Okay, great. What do you think are the main barriers to, I'm going to say it like this, but I'm thinking more probably about the chemical side of things. What are the main barriers to creating a circular system for synthetics? What's stopping it from your perspective at the moment?

**2:** I think it's funding, by and large. I think [redacted] done it in a lab. She's about to do it in a pilot brand, but if the government was funding [redacted], she would get it done much quicker. It's finding that funding, and I think it's possibly realizing, or the government realizing the scale of the problem because right at the beginning, when I started talking about this, people were saying, "Well, you could do some upcycling. You could do this, you could do that." and it's like, that's great and don't get me wrong, some artisan things that we can do will help, will absolutely help with, and I'm happy to, but the scale of the problem is beyond that and it's massive. It needs a massive amount of funding and a massive amount of stuff thrown at it to get it up and running. Once it is up and running, I think it could change the way we are.

**1:** That's really interesting. In terms of the operations, in terms of your plant, are there any barriers there? In terms of getting [redacted] or another processor what they want in terms of feedstock?

**2:** Yes, I suppose you'd be looking at-- Our garment recycle grades are sorted by hand and, okay, it might say something on the label but one of the things that we've all found is that what the label says might not actually be what's in there. One of the things that we've looked at is the fiber sort machine, but you're between a rock and a hard place, in that, if you take fiber sort now when [redacted]'s not ready, then actually she might change. When do you invest in that machinery? She's got to get ready for you to want to do the-- Again, if somebody would come along and say, "Right, we'll give you a grant to get a fiber sort machine to start working with [redacted]." We'd be happy to do that, but even more so in these current times. Now, the [redacted], we're struggling for money because our shops aren't open, et cetera, et cetera. All of that. Now, everybody else is finding. I think it's probably even less likely that we'd do any investing, or many people would.

**1:** Yes, that's true. I know that RAP have just changed the grants. How do you feel about that?

**2:** Well, we were all for going. We wanted to go through the WRAP grant the first time around, but obviously, there was the whole problem that we had [redacted].

**1:** Oh dear, I'm sure something else will come up. It's got to, hasn't it? I don't know how much you see evidence of what the consumer is doing in the waste that comes

through your facility, but do you think there's a barrier there to do with how consumers behave with their textile?

**2:** I think it's quite interesting, actually. It was horrific on the news yesterday, to see that people were queuing for Primark. It's like, "Oh, God, they've not learned." You naively went in thinking, "What will come out of this will be a better place," and the past few days from everything has showed me that actually that it's not. It's definitely not. I think it's quite interesting.

There seems to be like two sets of people. There seems to be people that just want to shop at Primark and we see a large amount of stuff coming through that. You've washed it a couple of times, it now looks like a [unintelligible 00:28:19] but then there are, definitely, especially amongst university students, group of people who are much more interested in sustainability. I have two sons. One's 25 and the other is nearly 24. 25-year-old will wear anything until it drops off him. The 24-year-old is much more fashion conscious, but him and his friends hardly ever buy anything new. It's all secondhand because they see it as a mark of being very individual, but they also see it as part of that sustainability.

**1:** That's interesting. Yes, it's definitely, I think some extremes coming through, isn't there? In terms of behavior. What about how people treat their textiles when they come to dispose of them? Is there anything that needs to be done there, or is it fine just to deal with what they do with them?

**2:** I think there's quite a bit of a piece to tell them to not put them in the bin. Then, I was working with a guy called [redacted], at Leeds University. He got a group of us together, including people at Procter & Gamble, to look at actually what can you do to the fibers so that if you wash them several times, when you do come to throwing them away because you don't like them, their life has been extended. They were looking at quite a lot of changing the chemical format of things or adding things to them and things.

**1:** Okay, I'll have a look at that. That could be quite interesting. Brilliant. Then, where do you think the opportunities lie for achieving circular synthetic textiles, I guess from [redacted]'s point of view, but also, if you could see a bigger picture as well?

**2:** It is getting somebody like [redacted] up and running to proper size. That's where you'll really see it. I think it's about doing quite a lot of PR stuff. I had this crazy idea at one point that we would have cities of reuse, where you wouldn't for one-- We have a city of culture, so for one week or whatever, a month or something in the year, Manchester would turn into a city of reuse, and there'd be bins and things.

You couldn't do it at the moment because they've got to have 7:00 to 5:00 hours and all of that. When life is back to normal again, I'm sure it will be at some stage, you'd have lots of donation bins all over. You'd work with the council. You'd be able to go and donate in places that you wouldn't normally, like libraries and things like that.

**1:** It's like demonstration?

**2:** Yes. Instead of it being that-- There's an interesting place, what are they called? It's in Belgium in Antwerp, I think. They've got a wonderful name, something like the crinkle winkles.

**1:**

**2:** It's really weird. I did meet the people that were part of these crinkle winkles. It is something like that. Basically, instead of all the textile collectors fighting with each other, they've separated Antwerp into four zones. If it was us, say, I would hold the collection rights for one zone. Somebody would have the collection rights for another, so they'll be no fighting over it. It would become that much more of a collection, a donation rather than just getting waste. Does that make sense?

**1:** Kind of like a community of--

**2:** Yes, crinkle winkles, whatever.

**1:** Yes, that's really interesting. I really like what you're saying about it's a bit thinking outside the box and thinking about new models for waste and reuse as well, and drawing attention, I guess, to different ways of doing it, isn't it? That's really interesting.

**2:** I have to decide if [redacted] the whole of Manchester and making them go and collect. That's what you've got to do. You've got to make it exciting. You've got to make it a bit fun and say, "Right."

**1:** I've also had similar ideas about citizen science projects that you could do with people photographing the labels of their new clothes, and then when they discard of them, there's all sorts of things you could do, isn't there? We should try and bring together some study. You've almost got to do it on a small scale, haven't you? Just to get some momentum.

**2:** Yes.

**1:** Brilliant. Really great idea there. The next question, we've put in here in a opportunistic way because of the time that we're in. We're just collecting people's perspectives on this because it's quite interesting. How do you think the situation arising from COVID has changed both the plans of [redacted], but also the broader imperative for circular materials and textile?

**2:** At the moment, there's no thoughts on getting back on board with it at the moment. [redacted] again, from Leeds, that's all gone on hold for the time being because we don't know when the universities will be open, that university will be open or anything like that. I'm part of [redacted] reuse and recycling group. We're holding Zoom meetings and things, but I think it has just for the moment, we've just put everything on hold while normality comes back.

**1:** You said you were hopeful, and then you saw what was happening with the shops reopening. Do you think this, perhaps hasn't changed how people feel about textiles?

**2:** I really thought it might. I really thought people might be a bit more greener and a bit more-- No, not at all. Not when they're queuing around the block for [unintelligible 00:35:14].

**1:** Well, we'll see. I suppose it will take a bit of time to tell, won't it?

**2:** Yes.

**1:** Maybe the experience of queuing it'll be a novelty, and then they'll just be like, "Maybe not." I'm going to just post into the chat this link. If you could just click through, and hopefully, you'll be able to see the slides on Google that I've got set up. Do you see that?

**2:** It's just coming up. Yes, I'll just go into it.

**[pause 00:35:55]**

Yes, got them. I can see them.

**1:** Perfect. What you should be able to see is a pair of running tights and a fleece with zips and pockets and stuff, and they've got branding on them. These are two garments from our case study who produce these types of things. It's 100% polyester. The leggings probably have elastane in as well. I'm just wondering from the perspective of [redacted], how does [redacted] experience these type of garments within a lifecycle? Whereabouts would you encounter them? What might they look like? What do you do with them?

**2:** They'll be donated into one of our shops. If they're saleable and still okay, then we would sell them. If not, then they'd come to us. The fleece might go onto festivals to be sold when it gets cold after the sun's gone in. We might do something like that with it. If it's not a very good one, it would get sent as a recycling grade. For some recyclers, zips and things like that are a problem.

**1:** Hang on a second. If it's unwearable, it would go to recycling. What kind of recyclers would find the zips a problem like the flocking, or would they take polyester?

**2:** Some of them will, but where it's automated, then it becomes a difficult-- Taking them out can be a bit of a problem.

**1:** Do they tend to be the shredding machines?

**2:** Yes.

**1:** The leggings? I didn't ask you this before, actually, do you find that sportswear comes-- What condition does sportswear come through your plant? Do you get a lot of this stretchy lycra just unwearable or--?

**2:** No, it comes through okay a lot of it, most of it, people seem to be-- We do get some that are damaged, obviously, but we get some that are all right. Our sister company in Africa cries out for sportswear. They love it.

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1: That would be considered the light-- What did you call it?

2: Yes, light clothing.

1: Light clothing good for African markets. That's interesting. Would they be put off by excess branding? I'm thinking this particular company deals with a lot of schools and universities, so they'd have university names on, would that be a problem?

2: If it's got a logo on it, we can do nothing with it.

1: Well, any logo not just--

2: Yes, it's any logo on that's not Nike or something like that. If it's not a brand logo, if it's a logo for a company or something, we really struggle to do anything with it.

1: That's interesting. Then, if it's in a non-wearable condition, it would go to recycle, would the recyclers be able to do anything with it, or is it likely to go to incineration?

2: It would go to incineration. It depends on the quantity of it whether we can sneak it in.

1: If it can be dispersed with other textiles, otherwise incineration. Yes, I remember someone said that yesterday actually that it would-- Sometimes they can get away with mixing it with other stuff. Okay, so on slide two, we're now looking at what would happen in the future. Ideally, from your point of view, how would you be treating these? Would they look any different?

2: Hold on, I'm just going on to it.

1: Oh, sorry. It's exactly the same slide but now we're looking at thinking about the future.

2: Oh, it's okay.

1: Would these be collected in a different way? Would they look different in terms of to make them easier to recycle? What was it?

2: That was in the future. That's when [redacted] steps in. If you can make things like that out of something that we can do chemical recycling with, then that's where you'd want to look.

1: What needs to happen? Do you think to them? Are they fine like they are to go through?

2: We'd have to look at what they were actually totally made out of and it would depend on-- Because, I know that what [redacted] is going to do with the chemical recycling is slightly different from what Renewcell is going to do. Once both places are up and running is, do they fit in with that?

1: Do you see automated sorting as being a part of that or?



2: It's going to have to become a part of that at some stage.

1: Okay. Would they be collected in the same ways that you collect them currently? They would still come through the shops.

2: Yes. Unless we became the feedstock home or somewhere like that which is where you could pick up from other places as well.

1: Okay, so what thing? Brand take-back schemes or something like that, or--

2: Yes. That kind of thing or even if you could take it from other charities if we have the source-- a way of getting rid of it kind of thing.

1: Yes. Would you ever, I don't know what the charity sector is like, in terms of competition but would you ever have, I don't know a consortium who owns a facility? I don't know if you've got together with other charities or--

2: We do get together and we're doing certain things in this. That isn't something that we've particularly looked at but neither is it something that we're particularly not looked at, if you know what I mean. It's not something that we've ever said, "No, we'll never do." It's not something that we've ever said, "Yes, we will do," but we've definitely looked at, can we pick up from other charities?

1: I guess if it's a real economic advantage then, you'd want to own that facility wouldn't you probably?

2: Yes.

1: Anything else that you would see being within that?

2: No, I don't think. Not at the top of my head.

1: Okay. The slide number three is looking at the next 5 to 10 years. What needs to happen for this to become a reality? Do you think within the next 5 to 10 years?

2: Well, we definitely need somebody like Defra to get behind people like [redacted] and push it. It has to become-- It can't just be that all over the country, a little pockets of people like [redacted], I've worked with [unintelligible 00:43:52] University, I've worked with Manchester University, I've worked with Leeds University, I've worked with [unintelligible 00:43:56]. All sorts of people are all doing lots of little pilots really. It needs to be all pulled together under one umbrella. That's funded by the government to say this is a problem that we've got and this is how we're going to tackle it.

1: Central investment. It's their policy that needs to go with that, do you think?

2: Yes. It used to be policy from Defra to go with it. Things like extended producer responsibilities and things.

1: Any partnerships that you see [redacted] needing to get this going? Are you already partner with Warren again.

**2:** Yes, we're just part with anybody.

**1:**

**2:** Anybody just do it. I think interested if we could get-- If we could do something interesting, be innovative and make somebody out of it, as long as they're ethical, then we're quite happy to just wait for the thing that comes along. Keep on networking and keep on trying to find the thing that's going to change it.

**1:** You said you've got these ideas around, reuse cities. Is that something that [redacted] would lead on? Or is there any possibility of that happening?

**2:** I don't know. We're in, like you say, we're in a bit of a strange place at the moment, so it's probably more September, October time when things are a bit more normal. Looking at something like that.

**1:** Okay, thank you. Slide number four is just the definition that I came up with. Well, not myself and Kate came up with. We're just asking everyone that we interview to have a look at it and see if there's anything that stands out or needing to be changed or that you would add in there. I'll just give you a minute to read through.

[silence]

[background noise]

**2:** They look fine.

**1:** Yes?

**2:** Yes.

**1:** Nothing stands out? No?

**2:** No.

**1:** Okay. Comes into my question, that was quite quick but you're so concise in how you answer the questions which is fantastic. Is there anything else that you would to add about this that you think is particularly important to this, I guess vision for the future that maybe the brands need to do?

**2:** I don't think so. I think people need to realize it needs to happen and the importance of it because otherwise, we're going to be swayed by this grand mountains of new textiles.

**1:** I guess one of the things which is quite refreshing from talking to you is that you seem to have a really transparent downstream. You know exactly where everything goes and you've got key partnerships with those people. Is that something that people want to know? Is it something that you--

**2:** Yes. We are finding that and we find that particularly in places. When we go and do festivals, some festivals don't care but places WOMAD, where you've got quite a

lot of ecologically sound savvy people should I say, definitely want to know where does this go up to here? If you don't sell it here, what do you do with it? Yes.

**1:** That's interesting. It's only festivals that you go to. You don't go to any other events. You don't go to sporting events for example, do you?

**2:** Well, no. The only thing we do is [unintelligible 00:47:52]. It's a bit of we do do that and we do have book festival, with books. Obviously not in textiles.

**1:** Yes, of course. This has to do with selling on, isn't it? You don't do collections in any other places? [crosstalk]

**2:** No.

**1:** Is it something that you're looking at collecting from broader or if you just got enough to deal with it?

**2:** No, we have looked at it, and expanding the textile bank network is something that we're looking at. We've got textile banks in [redacted] in London just sitting in the side of [redacted] and it's looking at this other-- If they'll have them at [redacted], which is beautiful, will they have them somewhere else?

**1:** Oh, right. Interesting. Well, that's the end of my questions now. Thank you very much for talking to me and I'll keep informed with how the work goes on. Brilliant. Thank you so much for talking to me. Have a good day. See you later. .

**2:** All right. Bye.

**1:** Bye-bye.

**[END OF AUDIO]**