ENVIRONMENT SEMINAR 2026 | SESSION REPORT

SUEZ: Policy certainty is essential to recycling investment

Fireside chat: Ellen Daniels, FPA CEO and Dr Adam Read MBE, SUEZ

05 November 2026 | Stationers' Hall, London



Dr Adam Read MBE: SUEZ UK

Dr Adam Read MBE is chief sustainability and external affairs officer at SUEZ UK and a member of its management board. He has more than 30 years' experience across waste management, local government, consultancy and academia. A former CIWM president, he received an MBE in 2024 for services to the resources sector.

KEY POINTS

- SUEZ modelling indicated a roughly 40% reduction in certain recycling feedstocks under DRS.
- Delays and policy changes can deter investment in UK recycling infrastructure.
- Initial EPR funding appears more visible in collection than in new reprocessing capacity.
- New materials should be tested in real sorting and treatment systems before scaling.

FULL SESSION REPORT

Changes to packaging collections, recycling fees and deposit return arrangements could transform the UK waste management sector, but uncertainty over implementation risks undermining the infrastructure investment needed to make those reforms work, Dr Adam Read MBE told delegates in a wide-ranging fireside chat.

EPR's potential – and its implementation challenges

Read welcomed the principles behind packaging EPR and Simpler Recycling, arguing that together they could improve the consistency of collection services, the quality of recyclable materials and the financial basis on which local authorities operate. He believed the reforms could help reduce reliance on exports of low-grade material and encourage domestic markets for secondary resources.

However, he was critical of the time taken to move from policy proposals to practical delivery. Effective implementation, he said, depends on waste management companies, producers, local authorities and policymakers understanding the entire recycling chain rather than focusing on isolated compliance requirements.

Read repeatedly returned to the need for systems that ordinary consumers can understand. Materials that are technically straightforward to sort can become difficult to recover when packaging contains leftover food or liquids, or when consumers put it into the wrong waste stream.

DRS changes the economics of recycling

One of the session's most significant points concerned SUEZ's internal modelling of the planned Deposit Return Scheme. Read said the business had spent approximately five years examining potential changes to its feedstocks, indicating an estimated 40% reduction in certain volumes relevant to its recycling operations.

This was a forecast for specific streams and SUEZ facilities, not a prediction that UK recycling volumes overall would fall by 40%. Nevertheless, the potential reduction could affect the viability of existing materials-recovery infrastructure and local authority revenue from recovered materials.

The timing of investment would be crucial. Moving facilities too early could leave them with insufficient materials; waiting too long could result in missed recovery opportunities. SUEZ was considering ways to adapt operations towards other streams, including commercial recycling and flexible plastics.

The cost of policy uncertainty

Read pointed to flexible plastics collection trials, including FlexCollect, as an example of constructive work between industry, waste operators, WRAP and government. The project had generated evidence about capture methods, consumer participation, costs and end-market limitations.

In his assessment, delaying the timetable for widespread flexible plastics collection had weakened investor confidence. Decisions by international investors were being influenced by the relative predictability of national policies, creating a risk that money otherwise available for UK facilities would flow to overseas markets.

Are EPR payments reaching the whole system?

In response to a question from Celebration Packaging about the approximately £1.4 billion collected from producers, Read said he believed initial funding had largely supported existing or emerging collection services. Comparatively little, in his judgement, had yet appeared as new reprocessing capacity or sorting infrastructure. This was an operational assessment, not an audited account of all EPR expenditure.

He stressed the importance of looking beyond collections to reprocessing and viable markets for recycled materials. Guaranteed demand, including recycled-content requirements, would help improve the investment case for domestic facilities.

Compostables and emerging packaging

Read also warned that innovative materials can create unintended problems if they enter waste streams before facilities are designed to handle them. He cited compostable packaging as a particular challenge for conventional recycling and organic treatment systems, including anaerobic digestion, where degradation characteristics may not match the plant's operating conditions.

He invited manufacturers developing new packaging formats to test them with waste management companies at an early stage. Controlled collection environments may offer solutions for specialist products, but infrastructure must be designed for the material's real-world behaviour.

The overarching message was that packaging innovation, regulatory incentives and recycling infrastructure need to evolve together – supported by policy certainty, consumer engagement and investment across the full chain.

SESSION PHOTOGRAPHY



Source and publication note

This session report is intended to be an overview and is not a verbatim transcript.