



# SUSTAINABILITY COMES TO FORE IN PRODUCTION

The vast amount of waste created in the making of TV shows remains a huge concern but indies, broadcasters and suppliers are finding innovative ways to tackle the problem.

**Ellie Kahn** reports

**P**ublic concern about the environmental impact of the excess of manmade stuff that is floating about – in some cases, quite literally – has never been higher. And TV has played a crucial role in educating people and raising awareness of these issues, from plastic-filled oceans to bursting landfill sites.

It is ironic, then, that TV production is such a big contributor of material waste. According to Albert's New Screen Deal report (2020), a typical tentpole production produces waste equivalent to the weight of 313.5 blue whales, enough plywood to fill 2.5 cargo planes and plastic bottles to match the yearly average use of 168 people.

"Anyone working on a production will have seen the huge amount of waste," says Carys Taylor, director of Albert – the Bafta-owned environmental organisation responsible for reporting these stats.

"Because of tighter turnaround times and increasingly tight budgets, things often get scrapped rather than reused or fixed," she says. "There is a clear need for better planning so that reductions can be made in advance of production, and to ensure that anything sourced is recyclable, to prevent it from becoming landfill."

More productions need to "sweat their assets", she says – reusing sets, props and costumes as much as possible, and making use of the trickle of new suppliers facilitating the exchange of materials between different productions.

*Derry Girls* indie Hat Trick is doing just that. "Historically, we've tended to err on the side of caution and stored props and costume 'just in case' [we want them later], which ran the risk of items languishing in storage for longer than necessary," says joint director of production Laura Djanogly.

"More recently, we've adopted a more rigorous approach to storage and disposal – we either donate to charity and educational organisations or sell items to raise money for charity."

For entertainment series such as *Hypothetical* (Dave) and *Have I Got News For You* (BBC1), sets are reused between series and any waste is recycled or reused, where possible. For example, Hat Trick recently started handing over used makeup and toiletry packaging to Handle Recycling, a company that specialises in sorting and repurposing beauty waste – either selling the resulting materials back to the beauty industry or turning them into its



◀ Far left: On Dave's *Hypothetical*, sets are reused between series and waste is recycled

Left: BBC3 series *Drawers Off* uses paper-based sets from supplier Vectar Project

own-brand products. Hat Trick also has a longstanding commitment to avoid using polystyrene and single-use plastics in catering.

For Djanogly, “this is where early planning comes in, to ensure we’re working with materials that can be recycled and that are ethically disposable from the get-go”.

She acknowledges that finding these suppliers, or working with current partners to find eco solutions, can be time-consuming and sometimes cost a bit more – but, she says, the Albert website is a great starting point.

And the free training Albert offers across the industry has made a tangible difference, she says: “We find that most crew and production teams are focused on and want to work sustainably, and come forward with creative ways to do so.”

### Innovative solutions

Innovative materials are opening up new possibilities to reduce waste and save costs – Manchester-based supplier Vectar Project produces paper-based sets, which have been used in shows such as *Coronation Street* (ITV), *The Rap Game UK* (BBC3) and *Drawers Off* (Channel 4).

Where conventional wooden sets are often burned at the end of a shoot or sent to rot in landfill, Vectar’s sets, which are made of paper fibres and water-based glue, can be recycled up to seven times. The engineered paper board is as strong as MDF or chipboard. ➤

## “Because of tighter turnaround times and budgets, things often get scrapped rather than reused”

Carys Taylor  
Albert

### MITIGATING ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT

Recycling and waste management are, of course, not the only environmental challenge that the industry needs to get to grips with – data from Albert’s carbon calculator shows that transportation and energy use are by far the biggest emitters of CO<sub>2</sub> on any production.

The average hour of filming has the equivalent carbon footprint of a return flight from London to New York, according to New Screen Deal.

Albert’s Carys Taylor urges anyone with responsibility for measuring and

mitigating the environmental impacts of production to separate material waste and CO<sub>2</sub> emissions, rather than lumping them together in the same bracket.

“Recycling is the easier thing to talk about, but recycling isn’t going to offset your first-class flight,” she says. “We’ve all been made aware of the risks of single-use plastics, but not many realise a first-class flight has a greater footprint than an economy flight. Changing those small things will have an enormous impact.”



### PROP UP PROJECT GIVES SET ITEMS A NEW HOME

Emma Hammill and Kate Allan stepped back from producing during lockdown to set up London-based recycling organisation Prop Up Project, and they now rehome leftover production items with local community groups and charities full time.

Towards the end of a production shoot, Hammill and Allan take inventory of unwanted items, offer them to local charities, and guarantee to recycle or sell anything left over. They also report back to productions about the creative ways their items have been repurposed.

The eclectic mix of artefacts they have rehoused include a frieze of *The Last Supper*, which went to a church in Shepherd's Bush, a pair of puppets for a children's theatre in Angel, lino flooring for new housing, and a guitar to help single-parent charity Dads House organise guitar lessons. They also kitted out a carers' common room in Lambeth, which accepted leftover flooring, sofas, cushions, throws, lamps, mugs and MDF.

"When cameras stop rolling, everyone just moves on to the next job, and there is never enough resource left to sort everything out," says Allan.

"Attitudes must change. Instead of putting lines in the budget for skips, storage or removals, we urge productions to charge for us instead.

We can save on years of storage costs and help fulfil organisations' corporate social responsibilities and sustainability requirements."

In just a year, Prop Up has distributed 4,932 items from 10 indies – including Hat Trick Productions, Hungry Bear Media and Plum Pictures – to more than 50 organisations.

In August, Mammoth Screen got in touch about a collection of props and costumes left over from nine series of ITV detective drama *Endeavour*. In six days, Prop Up had put on a sale for more than 300 fans, antiques dealers and curious browsers, raising more than £11,000. After the sale, usual service resumed and Prop Up rehomed more items with the upcycling charity Prop Houses, a community theatre, a foodbank and several schools. Facebook group Set Swap Cycle also took some leftover items for an immersive horror festival

"The sale was such a success, and it reminded us that you really can find a home for anything," says Hammill. "It was also a joy to create something for the fans; people who loved the show had the opportunity to walk around the sets and buy a memento.

"Everyone loves the fact that what we offer them is very high quality, and has that sprinkle of TV magic."

## "Banning plastic bottles on set is dead easy, but searching for more sustainable suppliers is not"

Chris Gilmour  
Vectar Project

The company's co-founders, Chris Gilmour and Tom Henderson, recently picked up Bafta's Industry Makers and Shakers Award for sustainability.

"You hear stories about scores of skips being taken out of Shepperton Studios every day," says Gilmour. "There is generally a lack of time dedicated to planning for the disposal or recycling of sets, and productions are reluctant to pay for the extra time needed to organise this."

Both believe that, given the industry relies on turning a profit, any reduction in environmental impact must be economically sustainable.

"Our sets are about a tenth of the weight of wooden ones, which means productions will need fewer crew to move and build them, and time saved on building and deconstructing can mean a faster shoot and less time in the studio," says Gilmour.



◀ Far left: Prop Up Project kitted out a carers' common room in Lambeth with leftover set

Left: *Love Island* ended its tie-up with fast-fashion brands in favour of eBay

“Our first objective has to be meeting the budget,” agrees Henderson. “This is the only way we can sell into an industry that will generally not spend more on sustainability. If a line producer can demonstrate they will save money and be greener, it’s a win-win.”

Gilmour believes achieving a change in mentality is the biggest challenge.

“We are up against a system where large London-based organisations insist on trucking their own equipment up to Manchester in 7.5-tonne lorries,” he says, noting that road and air travel are among the most polluting areas of the industry across all genres (see box, page 25).

“Banning plastic bottles on set is dead easy, but having to think about searching for more sustainable suppliers is not. We need a top-down approach, where commissioners and producers insist it happens through organisations like Albert.”

### Proactive moves

Producers, directors and actors have a huge amount of sway over decisions around sustainability, Gilmour says, and they need to be proactive about wielding that power – for example, through ‘green riders’ in their contracts.

“There is still a philosophy that what the director says goes,” he says. “It is very important that they take on the individual responsibility and embrace more sustainable solutions.”

While there is a clear need for reducing and changing the materials being used on productions,

Albert’s Taylor agrees there is also a need to focus on changing attitudes towards the issue.

She encourages productions to think about the ‘brainprint’ of their shows as much as their ‘footprint’, examining what they can do to shift thinking in the industry.

Even if a production doesn’t have the purchasing power to afford more sustainable technologies and solutions, making inquiries about them can send powerful messages to suppliers that there is a growing demand.

“Sending signals is the top priority,” Taylor says. “We need whole supply chains to transform, and there are an increasing number of vendors and suppliers willing to have conversations about it. Whoever your supplier is, ask them what they are doing to adapt and what timescales they can provide for sustainable solutions.”

Similarly, productions must be more aware of the signals they are sending to audiences. She cites the partnership last year between *Love Island* and eBay, which swept away previous partnerships between the ITV juggernaut and fast-fashion brands I Saw It First and Misguided. The deal, Taylor says, has been “really effective”, prompting a 700% surge in the number of searches for ‘pre-loved fashion’ on eBay a month after the series launched.

“We must be conscious of the fact that we are sending out a signal one way or another, and it can have a big impact on normalising certain behaviours over others. It’s profoundly important that as well as talking the talk, we walk the walk,” she says. ■