

Inquiry - Improving Queensland's Container Refund Scheme

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As an operator in the Containers for Change network in Queensland, I have been privileged to see firsthand what this container recycling scheme has contributed to our local community. Schools, sporting clubs, charities and other not for profits have benefited by being able to collect eligible containers and receive a 10c refund for each container returned to our refund point, not to mention the everyday change maker who recycle their containers on a regular basis. Every container counts and we endeavour to make sure no container goes to waste. We offer a drive through depot, 3 bag drops and Container Collect home collection service in our local area, as well as commercial agreements with local businesses. We strive to provide a superior customer experience which makes our loyal locals return to our refund points time after time.

I have been an operator in the network for 6 years and have seen many changes within COEX during this time. The last two years in particular have seen a lot of positive change and positive outcomes for the operators, COEX and local communities. Most of the network are small businesses who are operated by families and often need support with areas outside of their expertise, such as marketing and COEX are able to provide these services for them. I run my business by myself (obviously with help from my staff) which can be extremely challenging, and I have surrounded myself with a group of people within COEX who know my business and can help me problem solve, operate and ultimately expand.

During my time as an operator, opportunities have arisen to expand but due to circumstances such as council restrictions, this has not been something I have been able to capitalise on.

We have some limitations and barriers within the Containers for Change scheme in Queensland and I think these need to be rectified, so more people will join in and recycle their eligible containers at refund points throughout the state.

Firstly, if a customer brings in 1500 containers or more, they must sign a refund declaration, and we have to take a copy of their photo identification. My staff and I receive abuse from customers when we ask them for this identification, as they do not want to give over sensitive information just to be able to return their bottles and cans and also, they do not know how we are storing this information. The onus should not be on the operator to store such sensitive information. 1500 containers may seem a lot to some people, however we are in a semi-rural area so most customers store them up and bring them in at one time to receive a larger refund. I think this amount should be increased to 5000 at least. The amount of time and paperwork this creates, means customers must wait longer for their refund, which diminishes the customer experience. Customers also do not like having to sign declarations or give their licence to us to copy, which is understandable with identity theft on the rise.

Secondly, the legislated redemption rate of 85% is unattainable under the current system. Government and councils must allow existing operators to install infrastructure to capture containers which are not currently being collected via the Containers for Change network. This can be done in several ways, but currently those containers are not being recycled responsibly. We cannot compare to other schemes around the world where their refund amount is a lot higher than our 10c return. The 10c rate no longer holds the value it once did and an increase in this amount would encourage those who currently think that it is not worth it to recycle their containers. We should be striving for an achievable growth every year rather than an unachievable percentage. Creating behavioural change is where the growth will come from - for example, get into the primary schools with a strong recycling program and educate them about recycling so they create lifelong habits and grow up to be our future change makers. Not just

drop some bins at the school and hope for the best. We receive so much contaminated product through the schools that some of it must go to landfill as it is a biohazard (think rotting food and maggots) for my staff to count it.

I need clarity on the COEX strategic plan so as an operator I can understand where growth pockets are and I can plan on how to expand and capture more containers. COEX run off a low risk, high control model compared to the operators who have high risk and low control which means COEX can decide to put a depot where they perceive a gap to exist and reduce our volumes. This then makes the operator think twice about investing in the business and making it better as they have to work twice as hard to keep their existing customers. Currently I am nervous, as reverse vending machines (RVMs) located very close to other refund points seem to be a popular choice to increase container volume. If this happens in my area and I lose volume, I will need to decrease staff, decrease my significant contributions to charities and have to re-evaluate how to move forward in regard to expansion. If I was to install one of the RVMs myself, this would be a significant \$200 000 investment which is huge for my small business, but with no certainty of return as COEX cannot give us any volume figures from existing RVMs due to privacy issues, which is totally understandable but at the same time, not productive to expanding the scheme. We also need accurate and up to date data from COEX to make informed decisions about future investments and growth opportunities.

As a small business owner I employ 10 staff (including myself) and during the busy summer period, this grows to 12 or 13. I have extremely hardworking and loyal employees who now own cars, houses and have meaningful employment due to the Containers for Change scheme. If putting more depots and RVMS close to existing refund points is the solution to reaching the 85%, then which one of you is going to walk up to my staff and tell them they no longer have a job as we no longer have enough work for them? More refund points is not always the answer! There are definitely pockets of the South East Qld corner that need more refund points, but placing new ones near existing ones (2km is too close) does not make sense to me. I am more than happy to expand as I know a lot of other operators are, but we may not know how to do it or where to do it, so need guidance from COEX on this. By letting existing operators expand, the integrity and smooth operation of the network remains, as we know how to run refund points.

Overall, I feel the COEX run Containers for Change scheme has come a long way since we first started in 2018 and has continued to produce positive outcomes for all involved.