



Reducing the Plastic in Take-Away Food and Drink

Take-away meals and drinks can involve a significant amount of single-use plastic. The advice from Surfers Against Sewage, who manage the Plastic Free Communities project, has been to encourage retailers to switch to compostable containers and cutlery. This will help move communities from oil based plastic that could end up polluting the environment for hundreds of years.

Switching to cardboard and wooden take-away solutions will leave people with items that they can currently recycle in North Hertfordshire (if its not contaminated by the food). However, other compostable containers, e.g. those made from corn starch or sugar starches cannot currently be recycled and will end up in landfill or incineration.

Crystalline PLA (corn starch or sugar cane), doesn't break down well in the natural environment as they require thermal hydrolysis. This means they are not that different to PET if they get into the rivers, seas and oceans, they can still cause a hazard to wildlife.

Tidy Planet have promotional videos showing their Rocket Composter being operated in a 'closed; environment where there is both green waste, food waste and 'Vegware'(a well known brand of compostable take-away products). Discussion with Tidy Planet on the possibility of using this technology in a Town Centre suggest that it will require an investment of about £65k and trained staff operating it to ensure the suitability and mix of materials going into the composter.

There are a number of reasons why compostables are not currently composted. These are:

- They don't add any nutrition to the soil.
- Recycling is difficult for operators as they cannot differentiate between compostables and conventional plastics. Recycling has only been tried for 'closed' collection areas where contamination risks are minimal.
- Crystalline PLA containers need to be mixed in a precise way with other feedstocks to break down effectively (e.g. food waste, green waste) and the composting processes need to be run for longer to ensure that the materials are fully digested.

Although compostables are promoted as an alternative to single-use plastic, the fact that they will not naturally compost means they are not a 'miracle' solution. Reusable take-away container solutions would be less wasteful and better for the environment than any solutions based on recycling single-use take-away containers.

Ideally customers would take a re-usable container to the take-away for their food and drinks, however, we recognise that customers don't always plan in advance to have a take-away and those that do may need some financial encouragement to bring their own containers.

The Plastic Free Communities in North Hertfordshire have a proposal for NHDC which consists of three strands of activities, all of which will allow local residents to have more opportunities to avoid single-use take-away containers. The three elements of the proposal are as follows:

- 1) NHDC and the Plastic Free Communities produce and deliver a campaign to encourage all establishments that offer take-aways to accept and encourage (through a discount scheme) customers to bring their own take-away containers.
- 2) NHDC to set up scheme to loan re-usable cups for events held in North Hertfordshire.

- 3) NHDC to work with the local BID groups to facilitate the introduction of a NHDC Cup Scheme, like the scheme introduced in Shrewsbury (<http://www.shrewsburycup.co.uk>), across the District

Activity 1: Campaign to Encourage Customers To Take Their Own Containers To Take-Aways

The campaign will need to persuade both take-away managers and their customers of the benefit to the environment that can be achieved, without financial cost, by customers taking their own containers to collect their take-away. The campaign will need to address potential concerns, in particular, providing advice so establishments can be sure they will be compliant with environmental health requirements.

Activity 2: Event Loan Scheme

Many community venues and schools are set up with reusable cups, crockery and cutlery which can be used for their regular activities. Occasionally these organisations hold an event that requires a larger volume of cups, crockery or cutlery and often the decision is made to use single-use disposable solutions at these events, for example school fairs or church open days.

Additionally, many community venues either choose not to, or are not set up to provide occasional hirers with cups, crockery or cutlery. Having a local scheme where people could hire reusable cups, crockery and cutlery for their special events would also provide hirers of community venues with a way to avoid single-use plastic.

Supermarkets have schemes to loan glasses when they sell alcohol for events, but this does not provide a solution for events where organisers need to avoid glass due to the potential for breakages and injury or where there is no alcohol required.

It is proposed therefore that a loan scheme be put in place which would provide:

- Reusable plastic 1 pint cups, 1/2 pint cups, tumblers and wine goblets¹.
- A washing and drying service for returned loaned cups– this could be a ‘new service’ or could be a provided through an agreement with local catering establishments.
- Local storage, return and collection points in NHDC major towns – this could be linked to the cleaning service or it could be a community venue such as the library.
- Booking system

An event such as the Standalone 10k will use about 3200 cups, school and community group events would need volumes in the 100s. A loan fee would be set to cover the cost of the service which would allow the service to break even in its first year. The loan price should be competitive to the price of single-use solutions.

3) NHDC Cup Scheme

The Shrewsbury Cup (<http://www.shrewsburycup.co.uk>) provides an example of how a scheme could work. Organisations pay a pound for each reusable cup that they have delivered to them. They then charge a returnable deposit of a pound to customers. When a cup is returned undamaged (not necessarily clean) to any participating outlet the customer receives their pound back. The cup can then be washed and reused. If a shop receives more cups than it has given out they can be collected by the ‘Cup Scheme’ co-ordinator for a pound each. Take-away establishments will benefit by the saving on disposable cups. Customers benefit through having the ability to have a take-away drink without harming the environment or having to go equipped with a cup.

Summary

This proposal provides the building blocks to switch to a way of living where re-usable take-away containers become the norm. For people who are prepared to take their own containers it ensures that they are supported to do this through Activity 1. Activities 2 and 3 are a first step to a deposit scheme for reusable containers. The proposal is to put in place an economically viable event loan scheme for cups and a deposit cup scheme, but there is the potential to extend this beyond cups into other take-away containers if it proves popular and successful.

1 **Manufacturers of Re-usable Plastic Containers**
<https://www.ecocupshop.co.uk>
<https://happycups.co.uk>
<http://www.green-goblet.com>
<https://www.cater4you.co.uk/acatalog/Unbreakable-Wine-Glasses.html>
<http://www.johnsonscce.co.uk/index.php?route=product/category&path=1020>