

Plastic Free Hitchin & Letchworth

My name is Anni Sander, I'm speaking on behalf of the Plastic Free Hitchin and Plastic Free Letchworth initiatives tonight.

As you know Letchworth has achieved the Plastic Free Community status earlier this year. Hitchin is just starting on this journey. Working with local businesses and community allies, we support them to ditch the single use plastic and find more sustainable solutions.

In our towns we are blessed with an abundance of festivals and events, both commercial and community led. We have a monthly street food market in Hitchin, and a beer festival in every town. There are plenty of restaurants and coffee shops. Most selling their products as take-away options.

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

If the retailers switch to cardboard and wooden take-away solutions consumers are left with items that they can currently recycle in North Hertfordshire. However, other compostable containers, for example those made from corn starch or sugar starches cannot currently be recycled here.

This so called VegWare is currently not accepted in any of the brown bins, as they don't add any nutrition to the soil and add a significant risk of contamination. This means they end up in landfill or incineration. Composting these 'compostable' products would require a whole new waste stream to be set up.

Adding to the problem, most plant-based plastics do not break down well in the natural environment. This means they are actually not that different to PET if they get into the streams, rivers, and seas, they can still be hazardous to wildlife.

Although compostables are promoted as an alternative to single-use plastic, they are not a 'miracle' solution. Reusable options will always be less wasteful and better for the environment than any solutions based on recycling single-use items.

In an ideal world customers would bring a re-usable container for their food and drinks all the time, however, we recognise that customers don't always plan in advance or may need some financial encouragement to bring their own.

On this basis the Plastic Free Communities in North Hertfordshire have a proposal for NHDC which consists of three strands of activities, to better allow local residents to avoid single-use tableware.

- 1) NHDC and the Plastic Free Communities produce and deliver a campaign to encourage all establishments that offer take-aways to accept and encourage customers to bring their own take-away containers. The campaign will need to persuade both take-away managers and their customers of the benefits to the environment and address potential concerns, in particular around environmental health requirements and financial cost.
- 2) NHDC should set up scheme to loan re-usable cups for events held in North Hertfordshire. The scheme should provide reusable plastic cups, tumblers and wine goblets, as well as a washing and drying service which could be provided through local catering establishments. Even a competitive loan fee could cover the cost of the service and eventually make a profit. The demand is certainly there with events such as the Standalone 10k which alone will use over 3000 cups. But also on a smaller scale with school and community group events which would need volumes in the 100s.
- 3) The council should work with the local BID groups to facilitate the introduction of a NHDC Cup Scheme, like the one introduced in Shrewsbury. Businesses offer their beverages in the re-usable cups, for which they charge one pound deposit. Customers can return the cup at any other participating establishment in North Herts and get their money back. Businesses will benefit by the saving on disposable cups. Customers benefit through being able to have a take-away drink without harming the environment or having to bring their own cup.

In summary these proposals provide the building blocks to switch to a way of living where re-usable take-away containers become the norm. The event loan scheme for cups and deposit cup scheme can both be economically viable for the council. They also hold the potential to be extended beyond cups into other take-away containers if - as we are sure they will - prove popular and successful.