



Spotlight

Promoting reuse at Thurso High School

March 2025



As part of the Highland Community Waste Partnership, Thurso Community Development Trust worked with Thurso High School to promote reuse through the introduction of reusable tubs and a pupil-led campaign.

Background

In 2023, during zero-waste cooking workshops for year 3 pupils of Thurso High School, it was discovered that pupils were being given the food to take home in disposable containers provided by the school. To reduce this waste, we looked at replacing these with reusable containers.

In addition, teachers and facilities staff reported that many of the disposable containers were being thrown away, often still full of freshly cooked food, and causing contamination in recycling bins. We decided to create a behaviour change campaign to address this.



Groundwork

Bin audit

We started with a bin audit, to understand our starting point. We found that, during one school week, an average of **18kg of recyclable waste fails to be recycled** and is sent to landfill, due to both discarding it in the wrong bin or contamination in the recycling bins. **320 single-use plastic bottles** were found in general waste bins, and the main contaminants in recycling bins were soft plastic wraps and food waste. We also found **11 food containers full of food** cooked in the hospitality classes, thrown into recycling bins.

There were also positive findings from the bin audit – we could tell that the majority of pupils were making an effort to recycle properly. It was obvious that **soft plastic** was correctly perceived as recyclable, but was mistakenly being placed into mixed recycling, causing contamination. Therefore improving recycling skills, with special focus on soft plastic, was included in the scope of our behaviour change campaign.



Reusable containers

We had already selected suitable reusable containers that could be used for this pilot, from a previous project to introduce reusables in our Meal Delivery project

A donated dishwasher was provided to the school as part of the project, to enable the reusable containers to be washed. We had to carefully balance our action plan between making bold moves to influence our tough target audience and keeping any additional workload on the school staff to the minimum.

Our approach

The main levers we used to influence pupils' behaviour were:



The campaign motto was selected together with the student Sustainability Committee:
"In the world of pollution – be a solution".

- **Giving them as much autonomy as possible** - School prefects acted as campaign ambassadors and pupils themselves designed the campaign logo, which was used to brand the reusable containers and the campaign website.
- **Digitising the campaign** - We mainly communicated with the pupils by putting up posters with QR codes and creating the #beasolution website where we posted all relevant information and announcements. Occasionally, we would provide a slide to be displayed during registration.
- **Incentivising engagement** - We offered monetary prizes for better recycling and reuse to incentivise pupils to engage with the initiative, in the hope of creating habits that would persist beyond the intervention.
- **Tapping into competition** - As a further incentive for engagement, we also made the campaign a competition between the houses for the grand prize of a trip to the cinema.
- **Positive messaging** - We avoided critical or 'preachy' tones, instead focusing on encouragement and celebrating achievements.

Campaign and pilot

In order to engage pupils around packaging waste reduction, and lay the groundwork for pupils to engage with the pilot and remember to bring their own container for cooking classes, the #beasolution campaign was soft launched in November 2023, running until the end of May 2024. Activities included:

- **Design competitions** – to foster ownership of the initiative and promote engagement, we ran design competitions, including for the campaign brand logo and website banner, as well as for the best art installation made of waste.

- **Individual pupil reuse competition** - to encourage pupils to shift towards reusable containers in their Hospitality classes, individual pupils gained school merits for remembering to bring their own food container or for returning a borrowed #beasolution container.
- **House recycling competition** – each house had a branded bin to fill with items suitable for recycling, as a way of gaining points for their house. A leaderboard for school houses was updated weekly, based on the amount of recycling each collected.
- **Soft Plastics Challenge** – to raise awareness around the soft plastics that we found contaminating recycling bins, pupils were asked to collect soft plastic waste in exchange for £10 per 500g. To help them, we shared a soft plastic cheat sheet online and information on in-school collection points. This was an eye opener not only for the children but for their parents and Thurso High staff too. Once many of them realised how much of their waste could be diverted from landfill via large supermarkets they became genuine advocates. Overall, **11kg** of soft plastic was submitted to us during the challenge.



House competition bins



Winning waste art entry

Information and engagement posters, social media posts (Facebook, Instagram and Snapchat) and the #beasolution website were used to raise awareness and encourage pupils to get involved.

Following initial campaign engagement, **reusable food containers** were piloted in year 3 (ages 13-14) Hospitality classes between January and February 2024. This covered a total of 40 classes, with 169 pupils in total, over 4 weeks. In each class, teachers recorded the number of pupils bringing their own container and the number who forgot, needing to borrow a reusable container.

School engagement and support

It was critical to align #beasolution to the school's own objectives and gain the support of key staff within Thurso High. We made sure to listen to input and feedback, and minimise disruption and extra work.

In engaging with the school, we also made the following suggestions:

- **Don't make it compulsory for pupils to take cooked food home** - This was the main reason unwanted food was thrown away by pupils, together with the disposable containers. As an alternative, Thursco CDT was able to divert leftovers to our local Sharing Shed, so long as containers were clearly marked with all necessary information -which was also a good opportunity for Hospitality pupils to put their food hygiene standards skills into practice.
- **Send pre-emptive reminder texts** - Instead of sending follow-up texts to the parents when pupils forgot to bring their own food container for cooking class, reminder texts to pack the tub the day before would be more effective.

- **Trial allowing bottled drinks in classrooms** - Our bin audit found many single-use bottles thrown away daily, often still full. We learned that this was because pupils weren't allowed to bring these into classrooms to avoid spillage of sugary drinks.

Results and discussion

Over the course of the pilot, pupils borrowed #beasolution containers (i.e. forgot to bring their own tub) 21% of the time, which was a **35% improvement** compared with prior to the campaign, where 45% of pupils forgot to bring their own tub, having to use the disposables provided.

Furthermore, **65%** of the #beasolution were returned during the course of the pilot. As no return date had been specified, we are confident that all containers will make their way back to the class to be reused. However, we are conscious that the sustainability of this initiative hinges on a high return rate.

We also recorded one isolated instance where four reusable tubs full of food were found in the bin, which we interpreted as an intentional act of protest. We were expecting such situations and take it as a positive that this only happened once.

The impact of this initiative was limited by constraints on pupil engagement during school hours, although we were able to make use of wider community channels. If such activities were better integrated into school activities and/or the curriculum they may be even more effective.

Finally a note of gratitude to the teachers and other staff at Thurso High School who supported this initiative.

Learn more: www.thursocdt.co.uk/beasolution-intro

The Highland Community Waste Partnership (2022-2025)

Funded by The National Lottery Climate Action Fund, and coordinated by Keep Scotland Beautiful, the Highland Community Waste Partnership (HCWP) brought together eight community groups in the Highlands to reduce waste and promote more sustainable consumption.

Learn more here: www.keeptoscotlandbeautiful.org/highlandcommunitywaste