



# Spotlight

## Promoting refill & reuse on-the-go

March 2025



As part of the Highland Community Waste Partnership, Keep Scotland Beautiful worked to address single-use packaging waste through a range of initiatives, promoting reusable alternatives and packaging-free shopping. An overview of these initiatives is outlined below.

### #ChooseToReuse

11 billion items of single-use packaging waste are generated each year in the UK by our on-the-go lunch habits. This can be reduced by switching to reusable alternatives, like cups, bottles and lunch boxes and we encouraged people to do just that through our #ChooseToReuse campaign.

The campaign consisted of digital and in-store campaign materials designed to raise awareness and encourage behaviour change.

In addition, the campaign also engaged businesses to play a more active role in encouraging reuse among their customers, through a number of options for taking action and supporting campaign materials to ensure customers were aware and engaged:

1. **Accept reusables** -and make sure customers know!
2. **Incentivise reuse**, through either a charge on single-use items or a discount on reusables.
3. Implement a **reusable cup/packaging scheme**, so people can #ChooseToReuse without carrying around a reusable cup
4. **Banish single-use completely**, so customers must either sit in or bring their own packaging.



## Learning & discussion



- Lots of hospitality businesses accept reusables when requested, with many taking it for granted that customers know they have the choice. Our campaign helped promote more awareness and engagement around reuse and encourage more customers to remember to bring their reusable.
- When it comes to incentives, businesses tend to opt for a discount on drinks purchased in a reusable cup, vs a cost-neutral “charge” on drinks purchased in a single-use cup. This is despite the fact that the latter has been proven to be more effective and helps frame reuse as the default option. Better awareness and understanding is needed around this. For instance, Velocity Cafe had a positive experience in implementing a single-use charge.
- In general, it’s important to remember that both customers and businesses are time short and habitual when it comes to food & drink on-the-go. For engagement to be effective, it must take this into account and make reuse the more attractive option.

## #TryRefill

The average Scottish household buys 130kg of single-use packaging as part of their grocery shopping every year, making up 13% of all household waste. Zero-waste or ‘Refill’ shops give people the option to shop packaging-free, reusing and refilling existing containers with dry goods or other household products. As part of our work to address packaging waste, we set out to expand this sector in the Highlands, increasing both the availability and the uptake of this type of packaging-free ‘refill’ shopping.

We started by engaging with existing zero-waste retailers from across the Highlands, which turned out to be a core part of this work. Bringing these small businesses together to share their experiences and expertise, both with us and with each other, was extremely valuable.

Through this engagement, we were able to understand some of the challenges faced by this sector and decided that the best approach would be to focus our efforts on increasing engagement with existing businesses, in the first instance.

Our #TryRefill campaign was designed to do just this, promoting refill businesses across the Highlands, along with tips and tricks for shopping packaging-free.

This was further supported by our work with the City-to-Sea Refill app, outlined in the next section, which helps connect consumers to places where they can refill and reuse.



## Learning and discussion:

**Polling** conducted at the start of the project indicated that 42% of people in the Highlands choose to bulk-buy or refill groceries and household goods at a zero-waste shop or similar local service at least sometimes. Six in ten (58%) never do this, with the main reasons being:

- No shops like this near them (59%)
- Not aware of any shops like this (36%)
- It is too expensive (11%)

With the rising cost of living, refill shopping needs to be affordable and convenient.

There is also room to increase awareness of and engagement with this type of shop. In doing so, it's important to go beyond the 'environmental' angle to highlight other aspects of the business e.g. supporting the local economy, in order to reach a wider audience.

In addition, it's worth considering that people may not know how to use these shops, so providing tips can help. It's important to highlight that this is not an 'all-or-nothing' approach, and invite people to explore and try out a few refill options to start with. Zero Waste Scotland have a handy guide on [how to shop packaging-free](#).

Finally, it is worth highlighting that refill shops that offered a diversity of services e.g. cafe, meal delivery, community space or business to business, tended to be more sustainable.

## Community Refill Schemes

As part of our work to increase availability and uptake of re-use options we also worked with City to Sea to set up six [Community Refill Schemes](#) through the HCWP partners, to promote the [Refill app](#) to consumers and businesses across the Highlands.

The Refill app enables consumers to find places nearby where they can reuse or refill, through a handy map, whilst also helping drive more traffic to these businesses.

Our local Refill Schemes visited local businesses to engage them around our campaigns and get them on the map; and also engaged people locally to ensure they were aware of the app and using it.

These Refill Schemes will continue to promote refill and reuse beyond the end of the HCWP.

Below are the experiences of some of our Refill Schemes; including their motivations for taking part, what they were able to do in their local area to promote refill and reuse; and some of the challenges they faced.



“During the high season there is an influx of campervans, cyclists and walkers who are always in need of drinking water on-the-go. While a lot of local hospitality businesses and community organisations already offer free tap water refills, the lack of clear signage about its availability is one reason why tourists choose to buy bottled water instead. We felt joining the Refill movement would help existing reuse opportunities to be more visible and inspire others to follow their example.” - **Thurso Community Development Trust**

“To launch our scheme, we held an Environmental Sustainability for Business event with the local Chamber of Commerce, with input from the [ECCI Climate Springboard](#) programme and [Zero Waste Scotland](#). All businesses in attendance were encouraged to sign up to the Refill app.” - **Locaber Environmental Group**

“As is often the case in the food-to-go industry, businesses were frequently too busy to speak at length, or members of staff needed to forward information onto decisionmakers who weren't present. The best course of action was to leave fliers highlighting the issues, initiatives they could get involved with and contact details for their local Refill Scheme.” - **Transition Black Isle**

## Returnable packaging pilot

One of the actions businesses could take as part of our #ChooseToReuse campaign was to remove barriers to reuse by operating a returnable packaging scheme.



Such schemes make reusable (or ‘returnable’) packaging available to customers at the point of sale and include a mechanism for ensuring that the packaging is then returned into the pool, to be reused. There are a number of different approaches and models for this, which we compiled in our handy [returnables factsheet](#).

We had previously tested the app-based [Vital](#) scheme for returnable cups as part of the [Highland Cup Movement](#) and wanted to expand on this, to also test returnable food packaging, as well as returnable cups, as part of the Highland Community Waste Partnership.

The QR code based app allows customers to choose reusable packaging at the point of sale and return it, free of charge, to any participating business within 14 days.

Businesses were offered a free trial of the packaging and system through our pilot, which launched in Summer 2024.

Unfortunately, uptake for this pilot was poor, with only three businesses signed up. This was likely due to the time of year and also, being the last of our business opportunities to roll out, the local business engagement space was likely saturated.



Over the six months that this pilot was active, a total of **86** users checked out reusable packaging on 188 occasions meaning that we diverted **188** items of single-use packaging from landfill over the duration of the pilot. The majority of these were cups.

### Learning & discussion:

#### Business engagement

This was a challenge for this intervention for a number of reasons, some of which were touched on above. As this was the last HCWP intervention to roll out, it is likely that all amenable businesses were already engaged with different initiatives.

We also encountered a challenge in relation to compostable packaging, which many businesses have chosen to invest in for environmental reasons. Putting aside the fact that compostable packaging is only more sustainable if composting can be guaranteed, many businesses we spoke to felt this was a sufficient investment and were reluctant to take further action and potentially incur costs in terms of staff time and customer engagement, even though the cost of materials was covered by the pilot.

This highlights the need to make a better business case for reuse, as well as the need for further education around the necessity of moving away from disposable systems altogether: reuse will always be the best option.



#### Customer engagement

One of the barriers highlighted for customers taking up the scheme was the initial hurdle of downloading the app, which can be perceived as time consuming, particularly for customers who are 'on-the-go'. This is why we ran 'download campaigns' as part of launching the scheme, both on social media or in-store, to encourage people to download the app in advance of their next visit.

## What next?

Our work on refill and reuse has helped lay the groundwork for further engagement and, ultimately, changes with regards to how both businesses and consumers view and use disposables.

We know that, ultimately, reuse and refill alternatives must be simple and convenient to use and must be perceived as cost neutral, if not beneficial, with regards to both time and monetary costs.

Keep Scotland Beautiful will continue to advocate for legislative measures that support this, including extended producer responsibility and charging measures. And we will also continue working to build a foundation of education and understanding around best practice to support the transition away from single-use, disposable packaging.

### **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.KeepScotlandBeautiful.org/highlandcommunitywaste/](http://www.KeepScotlandBeautiful.org/highlandcommunitywaste/)

#### **See also:**

[Cup Box cup recycling pilot](#)

[Local packaging reduction interventions](#)

**To learn more about Keep Scotland Beautiful's work on single-use packaging, visit:**

[www.KeepScotlandBeautiful.org/cup-movement/](http://www.KeepScotlandBeautiful.org/cup-movement/)