



Spotlight



Reducing the impact of food waste in Lochaber: prevention and composting

March 2025



“Tackling food waste is one of the most important ways we can reduce the carbon impact of Scotland's waste. If food waste is sent to landfill, it releases methane - a greenhouse gas many times more potent than carbon dioxide.” Scotland's Circular Economy and Waste Route Map to 2030.

To tackle food waste in the Lochaber area, Lochaber Environmental Group (LEG) delivered a programme of activity to look at both preventing food waste and reducing its impact through composting.

Background

Food waste makes a significant contribution to carbon emissions, and we were keen to identify and implement solutions for reducing and reusing food waste appropriate to Lochaber's dispersed rural location. Highland Council has a derogation for food waste collection and processing in Lochaber's rural areas, with a limited food waste collection due to be implemented in Spring 2025 for the Fort William area only.

LEG have a long history of composting solutions, including community composting for garden waste. Unfortunately, the requirements for compost to be tested to PAS standards, meant that untested compost was still considered a “waste” product, so Highland Council was no longer able to pay for uplift. Without this money to pay site supervisors, it wasn't feasible to keep the sites going.

This led LEG to concentrate on home composting instead and, through involvement with the Highland Community Waste Partnership (HCWP), to focus on food waste composting, as well as a wider programme of food waste prevention.



LEG Composting workshop

Activity

We wanted to further enhance support for individuals wanting to reduce food waste and help them start or improve their composting activity. We recognised the importance of the waste hierarchy and how it was important to reduce the amount of food waste first, and only then to encourage composting of the remainder.

Working with others

To enable us to cover the Lochaber area, we identified at an early stage that we needed to work in collaboration with others. Time was spent identifying different organisations and communities that we would be able to work with to support the dual messages of reducing food waste and increasing home composting of residual food waste.

Another important consideration was to work with a local organisation to manufacture compost bins locally, thus reducing the carbon footprint due to delivery whilst supporting a local business.

Education and engagement

We delivered a variety of events and workshops across Lochaber focusing on food waste reduction, a variety of food preservation techniques and home composting. We were also able to offer online composting workshops in springtime which extended our reach. Where possible we worked with other organisations and put on joint events or participated in events they were running, for example the [Lochaber Climate Action Fair](#) organised by the Highlands & Islands Climate Hub.

To complement our composting workshops, we also built and gave out compost bins to households across Lochaber.



LEG Composting workshop

Working alongside HCWP Partner Transition Black Isle early in the project we drew on the MOO Foods composting materials to update the existing LEG composting brochure for recipients of our compost bins and those attending compost workshops.



Compost bins given away by LEG

"I found the most helpful aspect of the project is the leaflet that now has a permanent place on our fridge. Whenever the composting is looking a bit funny, I refer back to it and adjust." - **Workshop participant**

Promotion of events, workshops and compost bins through Facebook and Instagram, sharing posts to local community groups, as well as using community newspapers and newsletters allowed us to reach a greater audience.



LEG Composting workshop
social media card

Case study

To help give encouragement and inspiration to others to start composting, we produced a case study with one of our compost workshop attendees, showing their home composting journey.

At the end of the project, they said: *"Composting food waste gives me joy. A sense of satisfaction that what seems like rubbish is, in fact, gold"*

The Spirit of the Soil

Through the HCWP we were also able to reprint "The Spirit of the Soil". Written by John Wombell, it was originally researched and published by LEG in 2003 and focuses on how our ancestors managed when self-reliance was a matter of survival. John drew on a lifetime's work as a professional market gardener and a fascination with Highland archaeology for his research and writing. The booklet looks at traditional practices in Lochaber to enhance soil fertility and was based on interviews with several crofters and professional gardeners across the area.



The Spirit of the Soil

LEG were very pleased to release the second edition of The Spirit of the Soil on Friday 31st March 2023, with a gathering at the Highland Bookshop in Fort William.

Susan Carstairs, Board Member of Lochaber Environmental Group, said:

"We are delighted to launch the release of The Spirit of the Soil recently and I'd like to thank everyone who attended the launch. This book was originally produced to highlight the living habits of our ancestors and, 20 years later, we can see similarities between their values and the sustainability values we are so proud of in the Highlands. As food prices rise, whilst wasted food costs not only people's pockets, but the planet too, sustainable food production is as important as ever. I have no doubt this book will be an insightful and informative read for anyone who wishes to learn more about composting and soil fertility."

Following on from this, Kathleen Carragher and John Deering, Ardnamurchan based programme makers for **Radio 4 Farming** joined us at one of our composting classes to find out more about growing foods locally and maintaining soil health and The Spirit of the Soil. A recording of the show can be found [here](#).

Community pantries

We recognised the importance of community fridges, larders and pantries in reducing food waste, and how it was important to encourage the take up of foods from these, to help break down any potential stigma for people to use these and highlight the important work they do in reducing food waste that would otherwise go to waste from local shops or growers during times of seasonal gluts.

As part of the HCWP we supported the development of a new community pantry in the Plantation community. You can read about this more [here](#).



Plantation Community Pantry

Community composting

For those unable to compost at home, we explored options for a community composting setup. Working with [Kilmallie Community Fridge & Garden](#), and with the support of HCWP Partner [Highland Good Food Partnership](#), we set up a community composting scheme at the garden serving nine households. This project also formed the basis for a series of further community composting projects across the Highlands. You can read more about this [here](#).

Impact

Response to the workshops and compost bins has been excellent.

249 home compost bins have been provided to households across the Lochaber area over the past three years. The map below shows their distribution across Lochaber area and can be accessed [here](#).



Based on participant feedback, we've estimated that over three years, we've diverted a total of **72.04** tonnes of food waste from landfill through composting over the lifetime of the project, at an average of **2.54kg** per composter per week, or **12.24kg** per composter per month. Going forward, if all compost bins remain in use, they will divert an average of **30.9 tonnes** of food waste per year from landfill.

Workshop attendance

In general, workshop attendance increased over the course of the project, as can be seen in the table below:

	Year 1		Year 2		Year 3	
	Workshops	Attendees	Workshops	Attendees	Workshops	Attendees
Food waste reduction	7	55	11	107	10	126
Composting	3	14	5	35	5	59

Workshop evaluation

Evaluation surveys were undertaken at each event and efforts were made to make these consistent across the partnership and across different types of event. Surveys gathered feedback on the event attended, demographics of attendees, and suggestions for future events.

Our composting workshops were rated at **4.62/5** with regards to influencing participants to start composting and the provision of composters was rated **4.34/5**.

Here is some further feedback from participants with regards to the impact of our workshops:

- **66%** feel more inspired to continue composting.
- **62%** feel more knowledgeable and confident around home composting.
- **54%** have made long-lasting changes to their behaviour, habits and lifestyle.
- **50%** feel more informed about the links between consumption habits and climate change.
- **42%** feel more hopeful about climate action and the difference they can make.
- **36%** feel part of a community of like-minded people.

Participant feedback

"I love how the simple act of composting food waste can help me feel more connected to the ecosystem, and encourages me to think about waste, and the re-use of materials. Plus, it's about thinking ahead and providing nutrition for my future vegetables in my allotment!"

"I'm really grateful for the environmental group allowing me to get a compost bin and showing me how to use it. It's has made such a difference to the amount of rubbish that goes into our black bin. I've also learnt a little about growing plants, and my own veg."

"With fruit and veg from the supermarkets being flown in from all over the world its devastating to see it go in the bin. Unfortunately, sometimes this happens though - it may get hidden in the back of the fridge or the weeks dinners plans don't go quite to plan! However, being able to compost our vegetable peels, or ones that have gone a little off has made massive difference to our waste reduction. Growing vegetables from the compost made by previously eaten vegetables feels pretty special too! A very cool circular eating way of life"

"Don't think of it as waste, think of it as future food! – anonymous
The fact that everything that goes into either of my composting options would otherwise have gone to landfill - wish I had started decades ago!"

"Seeing the way the compost slowly rots down to create black gold for the garden is satisfying. I know I have saved food waste from going into landfill, as there is no food waste collection, therefore my little bit is helping with climate change."

"The spin off / related events were really good too, e.g. food preservation."

"Food composting completes the circle in our kitchen garden - from growing to harvesting, eating and then back to the earth."

Reflections and learning

People are interested in composting and reducing their food waste. Often, they just need to be given some **support** to start their composting journey or to troubleshoot what might have happened if their compost isn't developing as they hoped it would.

Allowing people to come together and ask questions and share their experiences is also important, helping encourage **peer learning** whilst building confidence.

As one participant said:

"Composting can be daunting, and I think it's very helpful to show people how to do it and get them going so they can see for themselves how straightforward it is. I think it is vital more people do this to save waste being trucked around and buried. The more people understand about composting and soil ecology including the benefits to their own garden as well as the environment the more people will be willing to give it a go and nature as a whole will benefit".

Working with others to deliver sessions across Lochaber and going to shows and events run by others to provide information about the services and sessions that were available worked well and spread the word to people across the region. Using social media and local newsletters was also useful for providing updates.

With regards to **evaluation and data gathering**, people were more likely to complete feedback if they were given paper-based forms. However, this then means that they had to be manually entered and analysed, which is time consuming and wasn't always consistent. Paper-based forms are also a waste of resource. By year 2 online forms were created, but many people didn't complete them, so a mixture of paper-based and online continued to be used. The online version enabled data from forms to be included and undertook basic analysis.

Uptake of the compost bins, as shown on the map, seemed to correlate with the amount of **promotion** of this opportunity, which generally went down as we took on more new activities as part of the HCWP.

In general, **engagement takes time**, as people become more aware of what you are doing and providing, especially if you are covering a wide area. The message will (and does!) spread.

What next?

LEG have applied for more funding to allow continued development of both of these composting initiatives and other work around business composting. We are now better able to support with learning and data, as well as better understanding of some of the regulatory aspects of composting.

Although ongoing support would definitely be helpful, we hope that the individual household and community composting initiatives we established will continue to run regardless

Resources and case studies like this one will be made available through the HCWP and LEG websites, as well as the [Highland Community composting](https://www.highlandcommunitycomposting.org/) website.

Interested in learning more? Head over to <https://www.lochaberenviro.org.uk/>

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