

Returnable packaging for on-the-go food and drink

Reuse is the best way to eliminate single-use food and drink packaging waste - making a positive choice to switch to a returnable packaging scheme can help you and your customers #ChooseToReuse and reduce the environmental impact of your business.

As a business looking to make the switch there are a few things to consider when finding the right type of scheme for you – for example, what new processes will you need to put in place at the point of sale, and how do different models handle cup loss. This factsheet will provide you with the information you need to help make that choice. The good news is it could both save you money and prompt an increase in customers wanting to use their own reusable items at your business.

What is a returnable packaging scheme?

Returnable packaging schemes are designed to help address one of the most common challenges associated with reuse - what if I forget to bring my own reusable cup or container? We know at least “69% of people in the UK own a reusable cup, but only 1 in 6 will use it every time they buy a drink - 36% of people said remembering their cup was the main reason they didn’t use it” (Hubbub, 2019). A scheme that allows customers to borrow, use and return a cup or container, rather than taking a single-use one for their food and drink on the go, makes the sustainable choice more accessible and convenient.

The Deposit Return Model

- The customer pays a small deposit at point of sale, e.g. £1 for a cup/£3-4 for a container, which is reimbursed upon return of the item.
- Often used for cold drinks in a “closed-loop” setting where customers tend to remain on-site (event venues, festivals etc).
- You can set up your own, in-house system for your business – this presents a marketing opportunity to brand your own reusable cups.
- You could choose to join an existing service provider and become part of a network where packaging can be returned to any participating location within the same scheme - examples below.
- Most service providers charge businesses a subscription fee that is equivalent to the cost of stock provided.
- This makes each cup or container “cost neutral”, their value is equal to the deposit taken from the customer. This enables you to replace any packaging lost with the deposit taken at POS.
- See how much you could potentially save by no longer buying single-use cups [here](#).



The QR code model

- There is no upfront charge to the consumer. A charge is only applied if the item is not returned within a given time frame, usually 7-14 days.
- A QR code on each item of packaging links a borrowed reusable item to a user's profile on the scheme provider's mobile app. Packaging can be returned to any participating location within the same scheme.
- Apps also have a map to help customers find participating locations.
- This can hold up POS if the customer needs to download app, but this should only happen once and be smoother from then on. Trials have shown that it's important to make regulars aware of the system in advance.
- Some providers also operate an alternative paper-based version for those that don't wish to download the mobile app.



[Huskee](#)
Huskee cups available for purchase are identical to those within their returnable system. You can purchase a cup to own and can enter it in to the swapping pool which then works the same way as other app based systems. This means that any cup loss is paid for upfront.



Will it save me money? Although setting up or joining a returnable packaging scheme comes with some upfront costs, in the long run it could save you money on the single-use options you would normally purchase on a regular basis. 2GoCup have a calculator tool [here](#) that can give you an idea of how much you could potentially save.

How many reusable cups will I need? [This calculator](#) from Circular & Co. helps give you an idea of how many returnable cups your business would need to have in stock to make the system like this work for you.

What about storage, washing & staff training? Another benefit of switching to a stock of returnable cups is that they should take up much less storage space than bulk orders of single-use cups. They do however require more time to wash - some providers outsource washing to a third party to help remove this barrier.

It is really important to make sure all staff are knowledgeable and enthusiastic about the scheme to ensure customer uptake. Either taking a deposit or scanning QR codes at POS will make their day-to-day tasks slightly different.

Customer engagement Similarly, if you chose to go down the reusables route it can be a good idea to incentivise customer engagement too. This could be through a discount or cup charge (more info on our [website](#)). Make sure you promote any changes on your social media channels and let us know too, so that we can celebrate it with you! [@highlandcommunitywaste](#) [#ChooseToReuse](#)

We use compostable packaging, are reusable options more sustainable? There is understandable confusion around compostable and biodegradable packaging, especially for those businesses and consumers who are looking to make environmentally conscious choices. Most single-use cups (regardless of material) are sifted out of general recycling streams due to lack of infrastructure to process them. Compostable packaging needs to be broken down under specific industrial conditions and anything biodegradable that ends up in landfill creates greenhouse gases just like food waste.

Single-use in any form is created to be convenient and disposable, it is central to our unsustainable consumption habits. 80% of Scotland's carbon footprint comes from the stuff that we produce, use and throw out, often after just one or a few uses.

What if cups get lost? Naturally, not all of the reusable items that leave your premises make their way back into your stock - either due to customer error or because they've been returned to another participating location. In the case of a subscription model (DRS) you have the deposit money to replenish your stocks, and the QR system will charge the customer and the service provider will replenish your stocks on request.

More information



Read more about the legacy of the Highland Cup Movement returnable scheme (in collaboration with NC500 and Vytal) in the legacy report [here](#). The Highland Cup Movement was one of six projects across the UK funded through the [Bring it Back fund](#). The Highland Community Waste Partnership will be continuing this work in Summer 2024, [get in touch](#) to find out more.

City to Sea have a great guide on setting up your own reusable cup system [here](#) and another for cold drinks at events [here](#).

For more about single-use packaging and other ways your business can help work towards more Conscious Consumption, including our single-use cup recycling pilot and upcoming policy changes, visit our [website](#) and [social media channels](#).

From production to disposal, single-use items waste resources, pollute our environment and contribute to climate change.

We can all support more #ConsciousConsumption.

Reuse | Recycle | Bin it