

Waste-Less Event Guide

August 2021



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Introduction

Please note that it is your responsibility as an event organiser to assess risk and put in place measures to ensure your event is Covid-secure. You should follow the latest government safety advice on reducing virus transmission. Please see the [GOV.UK website](https://www.gov.uk).

This guide is intended to help small-scale event organisers to consider their options when planning, in order to reduce the waste generated by their event. For larger events please contact us for advice or to discuss your waste and recycling requirements.

The guide uses the waste hierarchy, with suggestions for Reducing, Reusing and Recycling, and is divided into sections for different types of event.

Figure 1: The Waste Hierarchy



Individual/Family Events

For example, children's parties, large BBQs, small weddings

Reducing waste

Equipment

Some communities have 'party kits' that can be hired locally, which include reusable cups, plates, and jugs (usually plastic), and in some cases bunting, cloth napkins and even fabric bags for 'pass the parcel'. To find your closest one visit [Party Kit Network UK](#) or check with your local nursery, school or community organisations. Some are free, with just a deposit payable, and some have a small charge – often a donation to charity or a local community organisation. Some kits need to be returned clean, while others include a washing service. Check any quarantining arrangements.

If there is no party kit available near you, you could consider setting one up! The Party Kit Network website has a guide on how to do this. It is also worth checking with your school or PTA, as they may have a kit which is only hired out to the school community and is therefore not listed on the network website.

Many supermarkets have a glass loan service, for example Sainsbury, Morrisons and Waitrose and also Majestic Wines. Usually this is free with just a deposit and charges for breakage. In most cases glasses need to be returned clean – check with your local store.

Crockery and cutlery can be hired from various catering hire companies, just search online for crockery and cutlery hire or catering hire.

Food

Children's parties are often timed between meals and small children do not eat very much at them, so consider this when timing your event and try to calculate portion sizes and cater accordingly. Choose types of food which are easier to use up afterwards if there is too much – for example sandwiches dry out quickly and are hard to save to eat later, but pizza will keep in the fridge for a couple of days and sausage rolls can be frozen. Food should be brought out of the fridge just before serving, and any leftovers refrigerated again as soon as possible after – see [Food Standards Agency](#) for food safety guidance. To ensure Covid safety it may help to check dietary requirements for each child in advance, so that an individual lunch can be provided without wasting food, with extras available for those that finish. You can

do this simply by labelling the plates, but if you go for a 'packed lunch' style bear in mind that this can present extra challenges with single-use packaging.

At BBQs there is often a tendency to cook far too much meat, so take orders before you start cooking. Any surplus can then be frozen to use another time. If you have defrosted meat to use for the BBQ, cook all of it and then you can safely re-freeze any cooked leftovers. These can then be used in casseroles, curries etc. If you end up with leftover buns, separate and cut these before freezing, you can then use as you need them.

Reuse

Equipment

If you can't borrow a party kit, the next best thing is to invest in your own reusable equipment which can be used for family events like birthdays or BBQs for years to come – you just need to have space to store it. Plastic tableware stacks neatly, is lightweight and saves space, and should last for years, so you don't have to avoid plastic – it's not single-use in this case. There are alternatives available – you could go for proper crockery (check out local charity shops), enamel or bamboo/rice melamine (still a type of plastic, but longer-lasting). Make sure you choose something dishwasher-proof if this is important to you.

Fabric decorations like bunting can be re-used for a lifetime at all family events. Fabric bags for 'pass the parcel' can also be used for wrapping gifts at Christmas etc.

If you can't borrow a kit and don't have space to store your own kit of reusable items, you could buy cups and plates from a charity shop and donate them back after your party.

Food

At young children's parties offer surplus food to adults! Have a plan for this to ensure Covid safety – for example spare plates, covers for food not portioned onto children's plates etc.

Recycling

If you opt for disposables the best choices are plain paper plates and clear plastic (PET) cups. Some paper plates, including any with printed decoration, have a plastic layer on the top. This plastic layer means they can only be disposed of in the general rubbish after use. Paper plates which have no plastic content can be composted in your food and garden waste bin – don't put them in your blue recycling bin unless they are completely clean and free of grease. Please note that some plain paper plates also have a plastic layer, so check before you buy.



Avoid paper cups, as these must have a plastic layer to be watertight, and are hard to recycle. Plastic cups can be easily recycled with plastic bottles and tubs in your recycling bin. The best type of cup for recycling is clear PET plastic.

Compostable paper/plastic cups (for example Vegware, Edenware) are not accepted in your council's food and garden waste collection and are also not usually suitable for home-composting, as they require high temperatures. They need to be put into general rubbish.



Community Events

For example, school fete, village fair etc.

For small events of up to around 30 people, see the Individual/Family Events section.

Reducing waste

Encourage your community to bring their own zero-waste equipment with them – for example coffee cup (even an ordinary mug, depending on the type of event), plastic pint glass, reusable bottle, cutlery set, napkins, straw, picnic plate and a wet-bag or carrier bag for dirty items. You could promote this beforehand by running a workshop in the run-up to your main event for example sewing cutlery rolls, with advice on putting together a zero-waste kit.

Investigate options for providing water refills on site – is there already a mains water tap or fountain that you can signpost? You can download posters from [Refill](#). If you have access to mains water you can hire a temporary portable water fountain. Could a local business like a pub or café agree to be a refill station, and you could promote it?

Another option if you don't have access to mains water is to hire large returnable bottled water dispensers (for example Aquaid) and have them hosted by your food traders instead of or in addition to them selling bottled water. You will need to discuss this with prospective traders before you book them.

Reuse

Cups

[Eco Cup](#) offers hire of both generic and customised cups in a variety of sizes and styles. Customised hire cups can be printed with the name of your community event and can be returned to EcoCup to wash and store until your next event. Many different options are available. If you opt to purchase cups you could also make them available for others in the community to borrow or hire from you, extending the benefits and potentially providing a small income for your group or organisation. The cups can be provided to all traders serving cold drinks. At time of writing there does not seem to be a hire option for reusable cups for hot drinks, but you could check online.

An alternative option is to set up 'mug stations' at any traders offering hot drinks. Ask your community to donate any unwanted mugs they have before the event, or buy from charity shops, and provide drinks in these. A box can be provided to return any unwanted dirty cups. A volunteer will of course be needed to wash them up! They can then be stored for another event or donated to charity shops.

Case Study: Sustainable Cottenham

In 2019 the Sustainable Cottenham group worked with Fen Edge Festival organisers to purchase 500 reusable plastic half pint cups for the bi-annual event. A £1 deposit was charged by the bar for each cup when drinks were first purchased (refills were not charged). Customers could either return them later to the control tent for a refund, donate the refund to a local charity or keep them to use the next day or at home. Returned cups were washed by volunteers and re-circulated for the next day of the festival. The cups were positively received by the local community, reduced the waste that needed to be collected, and also reduced littering at the event. The cups are available for community groups to borrow for events year-round.



Recycle

Catering

Bear in mind that plates/bowls will have food on them when they are disposed of, and therefore will not generally be suitable for recycling. Check with your waste collection provider for the event what they will be able to accept and where it will go. The council offers recycling, food waste and general waste collections from events, see [Greater Cambridge Commercial Waste](#) . Food waste collections can often accept paper, cardboard, bagasse or compressed leaf plates and paper napkins for composting, if they do not have a plastic layer – often plain white paper plates are ok but check with your supplier.

Paper cups are not suitable for composting, so if disposable cups are needed it is best if these are clear (PET) plastic and put into a dry recycling collection.

Some waste collectors may accept compostable plastic ware and paper cups (for example Vegware, Edenware) in food waste collections, but the council does not as these items take longer to break down than the composting process we use allows.

If you are running an event with food stalls, speak to all the traders about their products and what type of receptacle is needed, and ask them to use your chosen type of packaging which is accepted by your waste collector. Only invite those traders who are willing to work with you on this.

Don't forget that you will also need to inform customers what to do with their disposable items. Clear signage on bins is essential – don't assume that the bins you hire will come with this, as they are used in many different settings with different waste items.

Figure 2: An example of very clear bin signage



Many customers will assume that paper plates and napkins should go into dry recycling bins since they are paper – so you need to make sure that the specific items in use at your event are covered on the bin signage. Signs should be minimum A3 size.

Always ensure that bins are grouped – for example if you are providing waste, dry recycling and food waste (compost) bins, wherever you position a bin, provide all three together. If this is not done customers will approach the nearest bin and use it for whatever they have regardless of whether it is correct.

It is worth assigning some volunteers with litter-pickers to keep an eye on the bins and ensure they contain the right items. If you have the resource or your event is small, you could even consider posting a volunteer at each set of bins for the whole event to help ensure that people select the right bin for their item.

Business / organisation

For example, networking event, conference

Reducing waste

Food and drink

If your event will be catered it is important to let prospective caterers know of your waste-reduction requirements when tendering. Things to think about include:

- Bottled water. Instead of buying bottled water, use refillable glass bottles of tap water on tables. You may need to do this individually or provide sanitising equipment to stay Covid-safe.
- Depending on the style of event, consider using water refill points with glasses instead of bottled water.
- Hire glasses instead of using disposable cups.
- Hire crockery and cutlery instead of single-use plates and coffee cups.
- How will food be set out? Cold foods are often presented on disposable plastic platters – ask about alternatives. You can hire reusable plastic or ceramic platters.

Programmes and tickets

If possible, send these out in advance by email. Most people will have a phone or tablet with them to access it, but you could have a much smaller number of printed programmes available for those who request them on the day. E-tickets are easy to use on a smartphone.

Promotional materials

Even many so-called ‘eco-friendly’ versions of promotional items (for example cloth bags) given away at trade fairs and conferences aren’t really – at the end of the day they use resources for a gimmick which very likely will be thrown away shortly afterwards, or rarely used. If you want your event to be memorable think of innovative ways to do this, like hiring a green screen photo or video booth, or providing a few recyclable cardboard selfie frames for delegates to share their pictures on social media.

If you will have other businesses with stalls at your event, you could ask them to think about this too.

Business cards

As most people carry a smartphone, the best version of this is just to have your contact details available to take a photo of. If you have a stall, you can make a

feature of this by putting them in a photo frame to draw attention. Another option is to have a self-inking rubber stamp, which you can stamp onto any piece of paper.

Reuse

Lanyards or badges

If you do these events regularly, it is easy to re-use plastic badge holders and lanyards. If it's a one-off, think about using stickers for names instead, which will create less waste, or consider sending out recyclable paper/card badges in advance, which delegates can attach to their own lanyard. Some companies offer this service as a 'Name Badge Mailer'.

Food

Have a plan for any leftover food. If you work for a large company it may just be a case of taking it back to the office and sending round an email! If not, find out in advance whether any local charities or food banks may be able to use it – for example FoodCycle, a community fridge or homeless shelters. Or you could use it as an opportunity to get to know your neighbouring businesses by popping in and offering them some snacks. The [Olio](#) app is also an easy way to let it be known to locals that you have food to give away.

Recycle

If you are hiring a venue you may not have much control over what waste facilities are provided – it is worth asking in advance. If you have chosen some disposable items because you believe they are recyclable, and the venue does not have the facilities available to do so, it will undermine your efforts.

If you have managed to avoid waste in all the above ways this may not really be an issue.

Other types of event

This guide is designed to help you think about preventing waste at common small or medium sized events, but there are many types of event that may not fit these descriptions. For larger events, there will be additional aspects to be considered, such as site waste management plans, infrastructure etc. Careful planning is required for recycling provision, as high levels of contamination can be a problem. As each large event is different, it needs an individual plan.

Please contact us plenty of time in advance, and we will be happy to help you plan to reduce waste.

“We are always happy to discuss options with event organisers – please ask!”

Useful links

Greater Cambridge Commercial Waste service – we can advise on and collect recycling, food waste and rubbish from large events.

Greater Cambridge Recycles – Facebook page for our household waste service, with waste reduction and recycling tips. We can advise on choices for family or small community events. You can also email us on waste.enquiries@scambs.gov.uk.

Eco Cup

Refill

Party Kit Network

Olio food-sharing app

For larger events:

Powerful Thinking: The Show Must Go On (festivals)

A Greener Festival

Event Impacts