

A vibrant outdoor event scene, likely a festival or market, featuring a young man in a maroon hoodie and a woman in a bright yellow raincoat engaged in conversation. They are surrounded by other people, some seated at tables with reusable cups. The background shows a white canopy and a tree with white blossoms.

SUSTAINABLE EVENTS GUIDE

REUSABLE CUPS AT EVENTS: WHY IT MATTERS AND HOW TO DO IT

A GUIDE FOR EVERYONE INVOLVED IN ORGANISING EVENTS



MANCHESTER
CITY COUNCIL

CONTENTS

About this guide

This guide has been produced by Manchester City Council as part of C-Change.

The Guide is for anyone delivering outdoor events in Manchester (and beyond) and is relevant for urban and greenfield sites, one-day and multiday events both large and small. It is also applicable for indoor event management, and of interest to anyone serving drinks in licensed premises. It outlines the benefits of reusable cups, provides advice about how to manage reusable cup systems, and offers examples and tips from Manchester's event community.



¹Find out more about [URBACT's](#) mission to enable cities to work together and develop integrated solutions to common urban challenges.
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Acknowledgements

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THE BIGGER PICTURE

Plastic pollution, inefficient resource use, and production of greenhouse gas emissions that cause global warming, are among the most urgent global challenges. In the UK, over 2.5 billion single-use hot drinks cups are used each year.³ It is estimated that 85 million adults, attending over 7,000 outdoor events annually, are using at least 100 million plastic bar cups.⁴ Moving away from single-use disposables is one way that events can reduce their negative environmental impacts and help bring about a shift toward more sustainable behaviours in society.

A first, if modest, legislative step to tackle plastic pollution came with the banning of plastic straws, cotton buds, and drink stirrers in England from 1 October 2020.⁵ However, there is currently no similar legislation for single-use plastic cups, despite the Waste and Resources Action Programme's national UK Plastics Pact identifying plastic cups (and drinks bottles) as problem plastics.⁶ While switching to reusable cups is currently a voluntary decision, they have already been adopted widely in the UK at outdoor events and indoor venues, replacing single-use plastic and paper cups. The

drivers behind this are varied, including a growing commitment among event organisers to tackle environmental impacts, financial and brand-related benefits, public pressure, and improved audience experience.

A recent report estimated that adopting reusable cups at key Manchester events has already saved 1.7 million bar cups from being used once and discarded each year.⁷ Extrapolating that data, it can be estimated that if all outdoor events in Manchester's public squares and parks moved to reusables, at least 1 million more single-use cups could be avoided.

Manchester is leading the way in its response to the climate emergency, with its ambition to be a [zero carbon city by 2038](#) or earlier – at least 12 years ahead of the national target – and through [Greater Manchester's plan](#) (which includes all ten local authority areas) to drive down avoidable single-use plastics. This is the first city-region-wide plan of this kind in the UK.

³ [Environmental Audit on Coffee Cup Waste in the UK](#), UK Parliament (2017).
⁴ It Doesn't Stack Up: How Disposables Compare to Reusables, Hope Solutions and ZAP Concepts (UK and Ireland) (2018).
⁵ As part of the Environmental Protection (Plastic Straws, Cotton Buds and Stirrers) (England) [Regulations 2020](#) (1).
⁶ Waste and Resources Action Programme's (WRAP) [national UK Plastics Pact](#).
⁷ What difference does a cup make? An assessment of the reduction of Single-Use Plastic Cups at Events in Manchester, Manchester City Council C-Change Project (2021).



WHY: THE BENEFITS OF REUSABLE CUPS

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Environmental

Using reusable cups instead of single-use cups can significantly reduce plastic production, waste, and the overall environmental impact of serving drinks at events.

Most of the environmental impact – usually around 90% – of any type of cup (including compostable cups) occurs as a result of the manufacturing process. This includes raw materials, water, energy and long-distance transportation. Other impacts after manufacturing include local transport, washing, and what happens to the cup after it has been used, ie. its end-of-life processing as recycling or waste.

Recycling plastic typically takes only 12% of the energy required to produce it, which means there is a significant benefit in reuse.⁸ Furthermore, each time a hard plastic cup is reused, the benefit increases in comparison with a single-use cup.

⁸ Britain's recycling statistics, [Finder.com/uk](https://finder.com/uk). (2020).

PET plastic, the material most commonly used to make single-use cups, is widely recycled in the UK. However, event industry research suggests that only 32% of materials are recycled at UK festivals.⁹

In addition, unlike metals, which can be recycled infinitely, plastics lose some of their properties each time they are reprocessed, becoming a lower grade of material each time. This is known as 'down-cycling'. It is also the case that every piece of plastic that has not been burned or recycled still exists in the wider environment, because plastic does not decompose.

The far-reaching impacts of this can be seen in oceans around the world. Plastic that is sent to landfill or incinerated still poses a risk of leaching toxins into the environment, despite advances in technology and regulations. Whichever way you look at it, using fewer resources and producing less plastic will benefit the environment.

⁹ Chiara Badiali and Chris Johnson, [Show Must Go On Report](#), Vision: 2025 (2020).

ARE REUSABLE CUPS ALWAYS A BETTER ENVIRONMENTAL OPTION?

Reusable cups provide an environmental benefit compared to single-use plastic or paper cups, once the number of cup uses passes a 'tipping point'; this varies between three and six uses compared to plastic, and between nine and 14 for paper. The range varies depending on a number of factors, such as the type of cups being compared, the efficiency of the reusable cup system, the percentage of cups lost, and the energy and water use.

In a recent study by The LCA Centre, in partnership with Plastic Promise (Netherlands), it was found that a reusable hard plastic cup that is washed efficiently is less harmful to the environment than any type of recyclable soft plastic cup, when cup losses stay below 25%.^{10,11} On the other hand, the same reusable hard cup, if washed inefficiently, quickly loses out to a single-use cup with a low environmental impact (eg. an rPET single-use plastic cup that is recycled after use). This demonstrates the importance of efficient washing to be confident about realising the environmental benefits of reusable cups.

To get a clearer picture of a realistic tipping point for comparative benefits, the Plastic Promise study compared the two most common scenarios at events:

1. Using a lightweight reusable PP cup that is cleaned efficiently and with a loss rate of 10%
2. A recyclable rPET cup with a recycling percentage of 75%.

The report showed that the reusable cup is more sustainable if it is reused six times or more. The reuse could be at any point in the life cycle of the cups, ie. it doesn't have to happen during a single event.

¹⁰ The LCA Centre is an independent research institute whose core activity is packaging life cycle assessment (LCA).
¹¹ Alan Campbell PhD, Loek Waegemaekers, Agnieszka van Batavia et al, [A study of the waste free cup systems at events](#) as commissioned by Rijkswaterstaat in cooperation with Plastic Promise (2020). The study was conducted in the Netherlands in 2020.

Number of uses, cups lost and how they are washed is key

Reusable Cup System

REUSE

MOST SIGNIFICANCE

- Percentage lost
- Washing Company

RELATIVE SIGNIFICANCE

- Cup type
- Transport

MINOR SIGNIFICANCE

- Crate
- In-mould label print

Single-use cup System

RECYCLE

MOST SIGNIFICANCE

- Percentage recycled
- Cup Type

RELATIVE SIGNIFICANCE

- Country of origin (cup)
- Transport

MINOR SIGNIFICANCE

- Transport
- Printing
- Packaging

Impact factors

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rPET: recycled polyethylene terephthalate
PP: polypropylene

Credit: The LCA Centre and Plastic Promise (Netherlands)



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Financial

Industry research suggests that a typical tipping point towards the financial benefit of reusable cups compared to single-use is around 15 uses.¹² Some events have reported an immediate net benefit at their first event (and every one thereafter) by using reusables.

Each event varies in type and context, and certain factors affect financial benefits considerably, not least the level of deposit and percentage of cups retained and who purchases the cups (eg. event organiser, bar company or sponsor).

The good news is that for large-scale events particularly, the typical difference between the combined cost of purchasing cups and waste management, versus the net benefit of retained deposits and running costs of a reusable cup system, is positive.

¹² It Doesn't Stack Up: How Disposables Compare to Reusables, Hope Solutions and ZAP Concepts (UK & Ireland) (2018).

Reputation and brand

Plastic is firmly on the agenda for society, and most events have taken action or are considering what steps they can take to reduce disposables. It has become such a high-profile media topic that those events not taking action risk bad press and feedback from audiences, who are keen to see changes

In many cases, events using reusable cups choose to brand a percentage of their cups, which can extend their brand-reach, and satisfy sponsor requirements. However, this needs to be balanced with the percentage of generic cups to ensure reuse and realise the environmental benefits.

In a survey about national deposit schemes for hot-drink cups in 2019, 58% of British people said they are 'very likely' to use a deposit scheme if one was set up; 22% were 'likely' to, and only 10% said they were 'unlikely' or 'very unlikely' to use it.¹³ This demonstrates widespread public support for such initiatives.

¹³ [Poll carried out by YouGov](#) and commissioned by CPRE (July 2019)

Audience experience

Single-use plastic bar cups are typically one of the most significant sources of litter for events, along with drinks bottles, cans and food serveware. Organisers using reusable cups report very positive audience feedback about the reduction in litter.

In addition, events can experience a 'multiplier effect', whereby the reduction in litter makes it feel more unacceptable to drop litter. This is referred to as a 'behaviour tipping point'.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that audiences generally prefer the experience of drinking from more solid reusable cups, compared to flimsy plastic or paper disposables.

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Overview

This section of the guide will help you consider how to manage reusable cups at your event successfully. In brief, you will need to consider:

- Whether to buy or rent reusable cups
- How to work with your stakeholders, particularly the bar company and concessions
- The practicalities of implementing a new system
- Communications with crew, stakeholders and audience.

In practice, much of this will be taken care of by the cup supplier and/or bar company for most events, but having an understanding of the issues involved is important.

Deciding how to manage your reusable cups

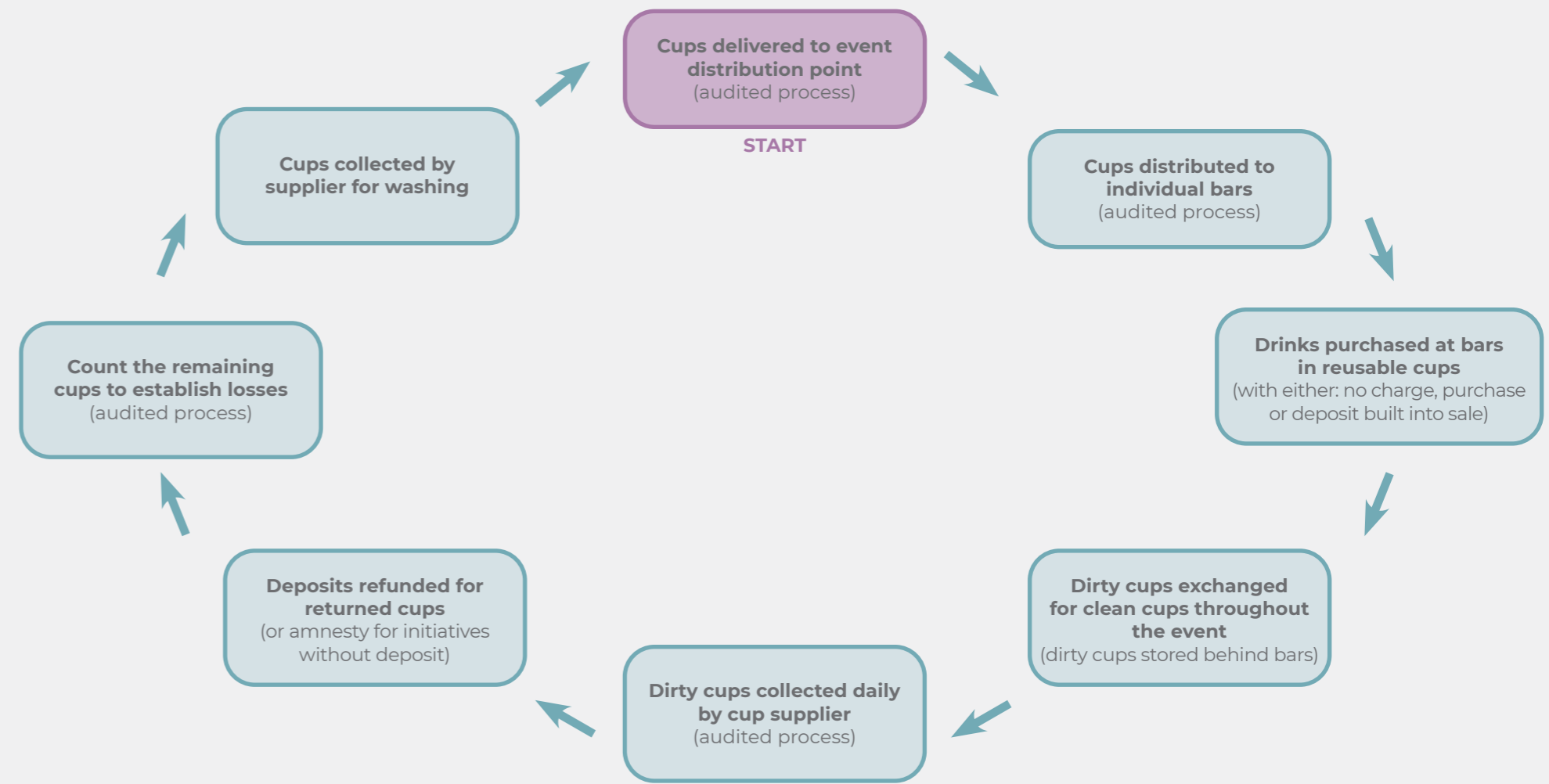
There are a few things to consider when choosing how to manage reusable cups at your event. Generally, the aim is to retain the highest percentage of cups possible so they can be reused. This is more easily achieved at events where:

- Multiple drinks are likely to be ordered
- There is a defined boundary for the event, eg. a fenced site or venue
- There is overall control or management of the bars, or at least the types of bar cup being used throughout the site.

It is possible to manage reusable cups at one-day events, as proved by the experience of the [Manchester Day event](#).

Reusable cup suppliers generally offer a range of options, including the provision of generic and/or branded bar cups, washing the cups on-site or off-site daily; or for smaller events, washing all cups after the event in bulk. The next few sections will consider the implications of these decisions.

TYPICAL MANAGEMENT PROCESS



Buy or rent cups?

Most event organisers choose a 'service' model with their supplier, e.g. renting cups as part of a contract that includes washing them. Other options include buying a stock of generic or branded cups to service multiple events, or an event, as part of a multi-year deal. The decision to buy cups, rather than rent, usually depends on the number of events the cups will be used at, and/or the confidence that you will be using them for more than one year. Financial savings increase and environmental impacts are reduced the more times each cup is used, compared to using single-use.

Generic or branded cups?

Generally, it's best to use unbranded cups where possible, or generically branded stock (either your own or from a supplier) to reduce the attractiveness of cups as souvenirs. Event organisers may choose a percentage of the cups to be printed with branding from their event or sponsors.

It is usually the case that the cup supplier will manage and wash the branded stock on an event's behalf along with generic rented cups. The balance between the number of branded and generic cups is an important consideration from both a financial and environmental perspective. Branded cups are more likely to be kept as souvenirs by visitors than generic stock. A carefully managed deposit system will reduce such losses.

What if sponsors want branded cups?

Work with your sponsors to get them on board with your plan: being seen to be environmentally responsible is better for their brand as well as for the event's reputation.

Cup sponsorship may need to be considered for a longer term than just one edition, to support cup stock reuse at annual events (for owned or supplier-managed stock).

While some cup types can be reprinted, this is not the case for most. It may be a shift for sponsors to think about this differently if they are used to printing thousands of single-use cups, but there is a strong case for brands to move away from this practice.

Washing cups

Larger events may choose to set up in-house washing facilities on-site, or invite the cup supplier to do so. Most commonly, washing is provided by the supplier off-site, either on a daily basis or all together at the end of the event. In the model where cups are all washed at the end, the cup supplier will provide enough cups to cover the total number of drinks likely to be sold at the whole event.

Cup companies request that cups are returned as quickly as possible after events, to ensure that the maximum number of cups are washed and reused. Cups should be washed as soon as possible after use and dried before storage to avoid mould. Professional facilities wash with two cycles: a pre-wash at 80 degrees with detergent, and a rinse at 60 degrees.

ARE REUSABLE CUPS SAFE IN A COVID-19 CONTEXT?

The opinion held by a series of trusted sources, including the World Health Organization (WHO), the European Food Safety Authority, the Food and Drugs Administration, the Center for Communicable Disease, Public Health England, the Food Standards Agency and Food Standards Scotland, is that COVID-19 is not known to be transmitted by exposure to food or food packaging.¹⁴ Current Government guidance on COVID-19 and food is that businesses are responsible for devising safe working practices and systems themselves, including for reusable cups or containers.¹⁵

An example of this from the retail sector is the #contactlesscoffee campaign – a safe system for retailers to accept customers' reusable coffee cups.¹⁶ It has already been adopted in the UK, is very simple, doesn't take more time or involve additional costs, and can be used by any hot drinks retailer in an event context.

The Sustainable Event Alliance (SEA), a global event sustainability organisation, launched a guide on the topic in 2020, in response to public concern on the safety of reusables during the pandemic.

Reusables at Events Hygiene – Global Best Practice Guidelines outlines best practices for implementing reusables consistently and safely at events and venues.¹⁷ The guidelines state:

"In analysing health and safety advice from across the world, some important truths are revealed in the guidelines and will help reinforce event organisers' confidence in keeping their reusables and not reverting to single-use, especially single-use plastics."

Key points from the SEA guide:

- Reusables are safe to use
- Single-use disposable items **are not** safer to use
- Single-use disposable items **are not** being specifically promoted by health authorities as preferential
- Heat and detergents **are effective** measures to inactivate viruses.

¹⁴ Food safety risk during the pandemic, Institute of Food Science and Technology (2020)

¹⁵ Guidance for consumers on coronavirus (COVID-19) and food, UK Government Food Standards Agency (April 2021)

¹⁶ #contactlesscoffee campaign, City to Sea (2020) <https://www.citytosea.org.uk/contactless-coffee/>

¹⁷ Global Best Practice Guidelines: Reusables Hygiene at Events (ed.1), Sustainable Event Alliance (2020)



Financial overview

Most events are aiming to find the right balance between covering the costs of managing the reusable cup system, satisfying sponsors if they have them, and retaining the majority of cups for reuse.

The business case for reusable cups varies considerably depending on the scale and type of event, and the cup service provider. However, in most cases the cost savings and/or revenue gain, provide a net gain compared to using disposable cups.

Financial benefits will depend on the arrangements in place, eg. if the cups are currently provided at no cost by the bar contractor or sponsor, there may not be an associated saving from avoiding purchase of single-use cups. The balance depends on:

- The savings made from not purchasing disposable cups
- Reduced waste management costs
- Revenue from deposits (or levy) on cups that are not returned
- The purchase or service costs of the reusable cups
- Any costs associated with managing reusable cups.

Choosing free-to-user or deposit scheme

The decision about how to manage the cups on-site is crucial from a financial and environmental perspective. Here are the three most common systems used at UK events:

1. Cups are provided for audiences for free. This is generally done if there is confidence they can be retained on-site, eg. within a stadium with collection points on exit.
2. A cup deposit is charged, which encourages users to return cups. This system offers the highest return rate, but that depends on effectiveness of communication, availability of drop-off points and audience demographic.
3. A non-refundable deposit, or levy, is charged. This means that users pay a one-off fee for using the service or effectively buying the item, depending to an extent on how the system is communicated and whether it is a branded cup.

Managing deposit systems

Buyers pay a deposit on their first cup, and then exchange their dirty cup for a clean one every time they buy another drink, to ensure safety standards are met. When they no longer wish to purchase another drink, the deposit is normally returned at the bar, or sometimes at another central location or exit point

Charging a deposit increases the percentage of retained cups, and ensures that costs can be recovered for the purchase of each cup that is not returned. Generally, the cost of a lost cup (charged by the supplier) is less than the deposit to users, providing a margin. Some events have successfully implemented an amnesty on exit without offering a financial incentive, eg. a free ticket raffle or charity donation per cup, to encourage people to return them.

If an event chooses to charge a cup deposit, it should reflect the audience demographic to be effective in encouraging cups to be returned. A £1 or £2 deposit is common at UK events that have implemented reusable-cup initiatives, but organisers of events with more affluent visitors may consider charging more.

Good communication

The critical factor for success is likely to be less about the price point of a deposit and more about how effectively the scheme is communicated to users. Many events have completely failed to communicate the basics of their reusable cup initiative, either in advance or at the bar, or even to let the audience know that the initiative exists, leading to reusable cups being left throughout site and audiences feeling overcharged for drinks. This can be easily resolved with good communication in advance, signage at the bars, and effective bar-staff briefings to clearly explain it to customers.

Explaining that you are using reusable cups for environmental reasons (to reduce plastic waste and emissions) is usually very welcome and helps increase return rates, as the public is now overwhelmingly aware of the plastic problem and climate crisis.

SAVINGS AND INCOME (compared to single-use)

- Purchase of single-use cups
- Less litter picking
- Reduced volume of waste sent to landfill or recycling
- Retained deposits from cups not returned (deposit system)
- Sponsor income.

COSTS (of reusable systems)

- Hire of cups and washing service, including delivery
- Cup branding or printing (if used)
- Storage tent on-site for distribution and audit.



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CASE STUDIES:
FROM MANCHESTER

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In writing this guide, stakeholders from the Manchester event community were asked about their experiences of reusable cups, to create case studies and insights into successes, challenges and barriers. You can also get inspiration from other case studies from around the UK and beyond in the guides listed on our [resources page](#).

Manchester Food and Drink Festival implement reusable cups

Manchester Food and Drink Festival (attendance 80,000) implement a reusable cup deposit scheme, reducing waste costs by 40%.

The 11-day Manchester Food and Drink Festival (MFDF) is a longstanding feature in Manchester's event calendar, running for over 20 years. In 2018, MFDF planned to avoid all single-use plastic from the festival's hub site, as part of their plan to reduce the festival's carbon footprint.

Top tip:
Speak to your waste provider in advance to understand waste costs by weight, to ensure you can measure and benefit from cost savings as a result of reducing the amount of waste.

Working with their bar operator, MFDF decided to tackle their largest on-site source of single-use plastic first: bar cups. On average, MFDF sell 45,000 drinks across the event (some 4,000 per day), which generates a considerable amount of single-use cup waste, incurring significant site cleansing and waste management costs.

Since 2018, MFDF have removed all single-use plastic from their main bar operation and converted to reusables. This has reduced the event's overall landfill waste by 40%, resulting in similar reduction in waste costs.

A key learning was around the level of deposit for the cup. In 2018, a £1 deposit was charged, and this was increased to £2 in 2019, improving the loss rate of cups at the event by 50%.

The bar supplier provided the stock of cups and washing service. This consisted of 5,000 cups, and a regular local washing service, which easily accommodated the requirements and drink volume of 4,000–5,000 drinks per day.

“The event site was clean throughout with less requirement for litter-picking, and a 40% saving on waste costs.”
Festival Director – Alexa Stratton-Powell.

First experience of reusable cups at Manchester Day

Bar operator Amber & Malt worked with Manchester Day organisers to implement a reusable cup scheme across the city centre open-access event.

Manchester Day is a one-day city centre wide event, organised by Manchester City Council, which attracts 60,000 people on the day. The event involves a large-scale parade and three food-and-drink hubs located at key sites along the parade route. Amber & Malt, a local bar operator who operate out of a bar trailer, ran bars across two of these key sites. They had never used, trialled or implemented a reusable cup scheme before.

As a newcomer to this type of scheme, they made the decision to hire the cups for the event from an experienced cup supplier, as they did not have their own stock or facility to wash them. They ran a cup-deposit scheme at the event, adding a £1 deposit onto the order of each drink, which was given back when the cup was returned. The cups were collected and washed by the supplier at the end of the day, so they didn't need back-of-house washing provision.

Overall, Amber & Malt found it easy to implement with the support of the cup suppliers, and customers preferred the more robust reusable cups. They found the cups cheap to

hire and wash. They have also been asked by other organisers to take their experience to other events, potentially gaining new business.

Audience research carried out by the event organisers showed that the reusable-cup deposit scheme was seen as the most recognisable way the event showed that it aimed to be sustainable.¹⁸

“Overall, it was easy to implement, and customers preferred the more robust glasses.”
Owen William – Amber & Malt

Top tip:
Understanding why biodegradable cups are not the best sustainable option is important, because you will inevitably have questions about this when making changes. [See pg. 17 for more info](#)

¹⁸ Audience research carried out by Enventure Research showed 21% of respondents referenced the cup deposit scheme as a way the event aimed to be sustainable (the highest out of seven examples given); sustainable food options came second at 10%.

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Festa Italiana pilot reusable cups

In 2019, Festa Italiana begins journey toward becoming completely single-use plastic-free.

In 2019, Festa Italiana, which attracts an audience of 25,000 over three days, made plans and targets to become single-use plastic-free. Working alongside festival sponsors, the organisers trialled reusable cups at two of the five main bars using a deposit scheme.

The trial provided an opportunity to gauge customer response and see how this could be implemented on a wider scale across the festival site. Benefits included an overall reduction in event waste of 20%, and feedback from customers about hard reusable cups providing a better drinking experience. As a result of this trial, an action plan is in motion for the next event to work alongside the festival bar operators and sponsors to expand the reusable scheme at the event.

“After making the initial investment and changes to our bar operations and logistics, the scheme has been very successful overall, and we would recommend this approach to other bar operators and event organisers.”

Mark Ruby – Yew Tree Events

Bar operator Yew Tree Events implement reusable-cup schemes across events in Manchester

Yew Tree Events invest in reusable cups, run reusable systems for clients, and report positive results.

Yew Tree Events are a bar operator based in Manchester. They operate bars at events including the Manchester Food and Drink Festival, Manchester Jazz Festival, and Festa Italiana Manchester.

They started their journey towards reusables in 2018 by trialling a cup-deposit scheme at the Manchester Food and Drink Festival. They invested in 5,000 reusable cups and gained access to a nearby local site for washing. Working with the event organiser they developed a cup-deposit scheme for all drinks purchased at the event.

They made a return on their investment after 16 washes per cup, and saved costs by needing to hire fewer table glass collectors. Over three years, the investment into purchasing and managing the reusable cups has been significantly less than purchasing and using single-use plastic cups.

SPOTLIGHT: THE FACTS ABOUT BIODEGRADABLE, PLASTIC, AND PAPER CUPS, AND WHY REUSABLE IS THE BEST OPTION

We are now surrounded by ‘bio’ packaging options. Are they better environmental options? Which are better than others? How can we tell? The simple answer is that in almost all event contexts none of these biomaterials is a solution to environmental issues, for a number of reasons:

Most ‘bio’ packaging is PLA plastic (polylactic acid). Made from various plant-based sources such as cornstarch or sugar cane, it’s a polymer often used to substitute petroleum-based plastics such as PET (polyethylene terephthalate). Crystalline PLA has low biodegradability in the natural environment and requires a high-heat industrial facility to compost, of which there are few in the UK. In short, it is not widely recycled in the UK and is designed for disposal. As a result, PLA cups (and other PLA products) are generally either landfilled or incinerated – the latter resulting in a small amount of energy capture, which is minor compared to the energy input that is lost in manufacture.

There are other problems with PLA. It looks and feels like plastic. This leads to it being indistinguishable from PET and other plastics, both at events (where it can confuse event-goers from using the correct bins and waste separation efforts on-site) and in waste-processing facilities. Composting facilities cannot differentiate between bioplastics and conventional plastics. The Waste and Resources Action Programme (WRAP) states in its most recent guidance that compostable plastics should be avoided where there is potential for

them to contaminate conventional plastics recycling.¹⁹ In summary, the environmental justification for using widely available ‘bio’ materials for events is weak.

What about ‘closed loop’ or ‘circular’ systems? One way that companies have attempted to address challenges associated with biodegradable or compostable single-use cups and serveware is to promote ‘closed loop’ or ‘circular’ services. They are mostly based on the premise that single-use cups are captured at the event and taken by the provider to a dedicated specialist facility that can recycle them. Many providers offer dedicated bins for their cups to improve capture, but it is often a challenge to capture the majority of a specific material into one stream. There are several problems with this approach: it perpetuates single-use behaviour; the materials do not have less environmental impact than recycled PET (rPET) and are not widely recyclable in the UK; and it causes consumer confusion, which is a real cause for concern.

How about recycling as a solution? It’s better to recycle than not, but it’s not the solution. Typically, plastic cups (commonly made from PET) are recycled only up to six times, and then become waste. In practice, many plastic event cups end up as landfill or are incinerated. Heineken has recently published a comprehensive Life Cycle Analysis study of cup types, called Good Cup Bad Cup, which corroborates most previous independent assessments that have been made – that reusable cups are the best environmental option.

What about paper cups? Paper has been touted as a solution to replacing plastic, but this is also problematic. Global forests play a unique role, supporting a stunning array of biodiversity, removing and storing carbon, and providing sustenance and livelihood for indigenous peoples. The pulp and paper industry is responsible for substantial impacts to the environment, including climate change. Paper has lower CO₂e emissions per tonne, but more material is needed to achieve the required stiffness than for a plastic equivalent.

In an event industry context, paper cups are lined with plastic or PLA to ensure that they do not leak or degrade while being used, meaning they are a mixed material, which is not recyclable or compostable.

What is the best material for reusable cups? The best environmentally sustainable option is reusable cups made from PP plastic or steel for cold drinks, and reusable cups for hot drinks... the best reusable hot cup is a whole other topic!

What if I can’t afford a reusable cup system this year? If reusable cups are not a possibility for your next event, as an interim option choose rPET cups for cold drinks; the only practical option for hot drinks may be to use lined paper cups, preferably from a specialist provider that can process them.

As a rule of thumb, steer clear of bioplastic – it simply isn’t a solution.

¹⁹ [Compostable plastic packaging guidance](#), WRAP (Feb 2020).

FAQS

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Q. Are reusable cups always environmentally better than disposable cups?

A. Yes, but only if they are used at least six times and washed efficiently.

Q. Will it cost more to use reusable cups?

A. If you buy them, they are likely to become cost-neutral after 10–15 uses, depending on the purchase price and washing costs. If you hire cups or choose a company to service your event, you can bring new revenue to the event, ie. by charging a deposit that is more than the cost of the cup, after covering the cost of lost cups, you will save money as you retain the difference between the deposit and the replacement cost.

Q. Are the logistics of managing reusable cups complicated?

A. There is more involved in managing reusable cups compared to single-use cups, because you will need to collect the cups, and wash and audit them, rather than ‘say goodbye’ at the point of sale. You will likely need storage space centrally and behind each bar, as well as a system in place. As bars already manage stock and money, this should be straightforward.

Q. My drinks company claims that reusable cups affect the pouring/quality of delivery. Is that the case?

A. No. Drinks companies use reusable cups in other territories and market sectors without issue, so it’s probably not a quality issue and more likely to be about honouring existing commercial agreements with disposable cup suppliers, or about wanting control over branding.

Q. Wouldn’t it be better to just use compostable or biodegradable cups?

A. PLA or ‘bioplastic’ cups are practically the same in their make-up as plastic. The same evidence and logic applies as with plastic single-use cups: reusables are better for the environment.

Q. Is it better to recycle cups than use reusables due to the transport emissions and energy involved in washing them?

A. No. The case is well and truly evidenced that reusable cups are the better option compared to single-use cups even if they are being recycled. This is based on the fact that the majority of impacts arise from the manufacture.

Q. Do hard plastic cups shatter, causing a safety hazard and clear-up problem?

A. Most reusable cups are made from polypropylene (PP), which does not shatter. Cups most likely to shatter are made of polystyrene (PS) or polycarbonate (PC). Also, due to reusable cups being returned to the bar, discarded cups are typically less of a problem.

Q. If we use a deposit system and the cups are worth £2 on return, won’t they get stolen by people to make cash?

A. Maybe, but it hasn’t been reported as a prevalent issue. Events can seek to prevent this by limiting the amount of cups that can be redeemed each time, or by applying a deposit amount that suits the demographic.

Q. How can we reduce cup losses?

Checks on exit by stewards or security (for controlled access sites); good signage so that people understand the environmental benefits and feel more inclined to make an effort to give them back; placing cup-return points at convenient locations with good signage; incentivising, such as giving £1 to charity for each cup returned to bins on exit, or entrance to raffles for prizes or tickets for the next event.

Q. Shouldn’t we be trying to avoid plastic altogether?

A. When considering environmental impact, the aim is to find the cup type with the least impact overall. Currently, the most practical and affordable option is a durable, reusable hard-plastic cup, which can be used many times.

Q. If cups are branded, used once and then taken away, is the environmental benefit realised?

A. Not at the event. There is a case that it may be reused other times, but if event-goers are just collecting merchandise from every event to keep in the cupboard, it is likely not to be a better environmental option. Organisers should carefully consider the balance of branded vs generic cups.

Q. Is it illegal to serve a drink into an unwashed cup or a cup provided by an event-goer?

A. There is no law that states you cannot serve a drink into a reused cup provided by the customer, as long as there is no risk of cross-contamination, ie. contact between a dirty cup and the bar tap. However, the Weights and Measures Act 1985 requires that the sale of alcohol be measured by one of three ways: the container (eg. bottle), bar cup (CE marked pint to the line cup), or the pouring method (eg. MDU). This means that if there is any doubt about the size of cup(s) being presented for reuse at a bar, ie. if it is not CE-marked, the bar is responsible for ensuring the correct measurement of liquid.

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Drastic on Plastic Campaign: Plastic-Free Event Guides

Association of Independent Festivals and RAW Foundation (2019)
<https://aiforg.com/initiatives/drastic-on-plastic/>

It Doesn't Stack Up: How Disposables Compare to Reusables

Hope Solutions and ZAP Concepts UK and Ireland (2018)
<https://www.hopesolutions.services/resources/>

Global Best Practice Guidelines: 'Reusables' Hygiene at Events

Sustainable Event Alliance (2020)
<https://thrive.sustainable-event-alliance.org/global-reusables-at-events-hygiene-standard/>

A Study of Waste-Free Cup Systems at Events

LCA Centre commissioned by Rijkswaterstaat in co-operation with Plastic Promise (2020)
<https://www.plasticpromise.nl/lca-report>

Vision: 2025 knowledge hub – a database of event sustainability reports, guides and case studies
<https://www.vision2025.org.uk>

The Show Must Go On: Environmental impact report for the UK festival and outdoor events industry

Vision: 2025 (2020)
<https://www.vision2025.org.uk/the-show-must-go-on/>

Manchester Sustainable Events Guides

Manchester City Council and Julie's Bicycle (2019)
https://www.manchester.gov.uk/downloads/download/7129/guides_to_organising_sustainable_events

Towards the Circular Economy: A Briefing Paper

Julie's Bicycle
<https://juliesbicycle.com/resource-circular-economy-2018/>

Waste Management at Outdoor Events Guide (2015)

Julie's Bicycle
<https://juliesbicycle.com/resource-waste-outdoor-events-2015/>

Recycle Now

A national recycling campaign for England, supported and funded by the Government, managed by WRAP and used locally by over 90% of English authorities
<https://www.recyclenow.com>

Suppliers

Branded Cups/Happy Cups

www.branded-cups.com
peter@branded-cups.com

Yew Tree Events

www.facebook.com/YewTreeEvents

Green Goblet

<http://www.green-goblet.com>
info@greengoblet.com

ReCup

www.recupuk.co.uk
info@recup.co.uk

ECODISCO

<https://www.ecodisco.uk>
info@ecodisco.uk



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