

Responsible Plastics: our action plan to 2025

Version 2: September 2024






The University of Manchester and its Students Union is committed to the responsible use of plastics, minimising waste, and seeking opportunities to reuse and recycle plastic, allowing for circularity and efficiency in use.

The University of Manchester is leading on a range of plastics research exploring new and different ways of making, using, and recycling. Outputs of our research inform our ongoing approach to responsible plastic management and guide our actions set out below.

This Action Plan maps out our progress so far and our targets to achieve by 2025.

| Focus | The challenge | Our work so far | Our actions to 2025 |
|---|--|---|---|
| Plastic bottles | We recycle around 47 tonnes of plastic bottles each year. A better solution is bringing a reusable bottle to refill from our campus water dispensers. | <p>We have mapped our publicly accessible water dispensers on our Sustainability Map to encourage our staff and students to refill their reusable water bottles. Many of our Food on Campus outlets are also displayed on the Refill app.</p> <p>We have improved water dispenser provision across campus and produced high quality signage for drinking water facilities. We will continue to roll out improvements.</p> | <p>We will continue to improve water dispenser provision across campus and produce high quality signage for drinking water facilities.</p> <p>We will explore opportunities via deposit return schemes & reverse vending to increase the reuse and recycling of plastic bottles.</p> <p>We will explore opportunities to expand the items of plastics recycled through our plastic bottle recycling contractors.</p> |
| Hot drink cups | We sell over 732,000 hot drinks each year, which produces a large amount of waste. | <p>We have explored moving to compostable cups, however when tested by our Sustainable Materials specialists a small amount of polymeric material was found to be in them. We also explored if the cups could go into the paper waste or food waste bins. Our waste contractors confirmed that they would be removed from both waste streams. It was therefore decided to promote reusable mugs instead.</p> <p>We have introduced The Bee Cup, a returnable cup scheme right across campus, including all Unicafe's and a number of partners. Since its launch in September 2024 the scheme has achieved more than 2000 users and 6000 scans in its first month of use. It is hoped the scheme will significantly reduce the number of paper cups on campus and extend into the city longer term.</p> | <p>We will increase the number of drinks sold in reusable cups and Bee cups in our outlets and will continue to research initiatives to improve our reuse scheme.</p> |
| Single-use plastic cups in student bars | Large numbers of single-use plastic cups are used in our student bars, especially during peak times. | <p>We have introduced reusable cups in our Fallowfield campus bar Squirrels, switching to a completely plastic-free drinks service.</p> | <p>We are working towards introducing reusable cups in more bars across campus. Where plastic cups are procured, we will seek to buy products made from recycled content.</p> |
| Single-use plastics in labs | Laboratories are heavily reliant on single-use plastics. Reducing these consumables is difficult due to issues of contamination, sterility and cost-effectiveness. | <p>The School of Biological Sciences launched a project to reduce the amount of plastic in their undergraduate teaching laboratory classes. The 'Plastic 6R' approach (refine, reduce, reuse, refill, replace, recycle(d)) has been applied to 12 practical classes and saved more than 37,000 pieces of plastic annually. This initiative was the 2020 winner in the Outstanding Contribution to Environmental Sustainability category of our Making a Difference Awards.</p> <p>This procedure has been expanded across additional teaching laboratories and adapted for use in research laboratories. The 6R approach has also been adapted to home, campus and workplace environments.</p> <p>The University of Manchester also use the Laboratory Efficiency Assessment Framework (LEAF) which is a certification scheme designed to enable staff and students to understand and improve the sustainability and efficiency of their laboratory areas. LEAF contains toolkits and resources to help labs limit their single-use plastics. As of 2024, 324 labs have been certified by LEAF.</p> | <p>We will expand this procedure across all our teaching and research laboratories across all Schools, Departments, Faculties.</p> <p>We will work with Compliance & Risk Teams to increase the range of recycling of laboratory plastics.</p> <p>We will continue to expand our LEAF certified labs, with an aim to certify all labs by August 2025.</p> |
| Labs suppliers' initiatives | Laboratories rely on suppliers for much of their equipment, but are often left with large amounts of packaging to dispose of through University waste streams. | <p>We are working with our labs suppliers to promote takeback schemes for excess packaging and recycle frequently used items such as pipette tips. <i>E.g. StarLab stackpack returns, Promega and NEB polystyrene box returns.</i></p> | <p>We will continue to promote sustainable initiatives across our laboratories and work with our suppliers to further reduce single-use plastic, encouraging recycling and takeback schemes.</p> <p>In the first instance, the Faculty of Biology, Medicine & Health will develop a standard operating procedure for dealing with suppliers, to reduce packaging & promote sustainable packaging, in line with circular economy principles.</p> |
| Stationery | | <p>We held stationery amnesties in 2019 & 2020 and again in 2024, to reduce the procurement of unnecessary materials including plastic, as well as</p> | <p>We will run additional stationery amnesties and promote products with circular economy potential where possible.</p> |

| | | | |
|--|---|--|--|
| | Our departments order large amounts of stationery each year, which can sometimes become unused and expensive. | <p>avoiding their disposal and associated costs. Remaining stationery is donated to charity if it cannot be reused internally.</p> <p>The Want Not Waste Store in the Student's Union also offer a stationery recycling facility via Teracycle.</p> <p>Our Furniture 4 reuse store expanded in 2023 and as of July 2024, contains a section for unwanted and donated stationery. Staff, students and local schools can then access this for free.</p> | |
| Freebies at events | Single-use plastics are often used at events for convenience and cost- | In 2024 our Environmental Sustainability team released our sustainable giveaway guidelines . This document advises what we do and do not endorse for giveaways. The use of single use plastic items and packaging is prohibited, and reusable and sustainably sourced items are recommended. Recent events have started to provide experiences rather than items as giveaways. | We will promote plastic-free events across the University and continue to advocate for the implementation of our sustainable giveaway guidelines in all future events. |
| Single-use plastic cups in staff areas | Frequent events such as meetings, interviews and conferences mean that many single-use plastic cups are provided for visitors to use with our water dispensers. This produces large amounts of waste and financial costs for departments. | <p>We encourage our departments to replace their single-use plastic cups with reusable alternatives, for events, meetings and for visitors to use. This reduces costs and associated waste.</p> <p>Several departments have already stopped ordering plastic cups and now use reusable glasses.</p> <p>We are working to stop the purchase of plastic cups, and to promote or provide the use of alternatives, particularly for staff.</p> | <p>We will reduce the number of plastic cups purchased for use with water dispensers, especially in staff areas.</p> <p>Where plastic cups are procured, we will seek to buy products made from recycled content.</p> <p>We will develop a position statement or procedure to allow the above to happen consistently across campus.</p> |
| Staff and student engagement | The University of Manchester has more than 12,000 staff members as has one of the largest student communities in the UK. | <p>In 2024 we ran Sustainability Action Month which was a month centred around sustainability engagement for staff and students. One week was based on reducing consumption and recycling, in which we hosted events aimed at reducing the amount of single use plastics.</p> <p>'Step Up & Lead' Sustainability Champions was launched in 2022. Sustainability Champions are students who take on an additional role promoting awareness of sustainability issues amongst their peers to encourage environmental action, refreshed annually.</p> <p>In September 2024 we developed an engagement calendar in which January is all about reducing reusing and recycling. The reduction of single use plastics features heavily in this theme and events will be hosted to encourage alternative options.</p> | <p>We will expand the engagement of staff and students at in person events using our engagement calendar</p> <p>We will develop the Step Up & Lead Sustainability Champions roles and attract more student volunteers.</p> <p>We will set up an engagement app for staff and students which will encourage actions that reduce single use plastic use.</p> <p>We will develop a position statement or standard operating procedure to allow consistent messaging around responsible plastics in line with the University's best practice research.</p> |
| Manchester Museum |  <p>Many gift shop items arrive in plastic packaging or are designed to be single-use products.</p> | <p>Our Manchester Museum is taking actions to reduce its plastic, including selling soft toys made from recycled plastic bottles and encouraging suppliers to eliminate plastic packaging.</p> <p>The gift shop has continued to research sustainable alternatives to plastic across products and actively encourages suppliers to use less packaging and alternatives to cellophane wrapping.</p> | <p>The goal to become one of the industry leaders in sustainable retail continues. The Museum Team will develop a new retail strategy and mission statement for the new museum shop which reopened in February 2023.</p> <p>We will utilise opportunities provided by this public facing institution to influence plastics behaviour beyond staff and students into the wider community.</p> |
| Want not Waste Shop |  <p>Zero waste living can be expensive and inaccessible to many people.</p> | <p>Our Want not Waste shop sells a selection of zero waste products, including spices, pulses, grains and sugar, helping you to avoid excess plastic packaging. Customers can bring their own containers or bags to fill up products and pay by weight or item. This can help reduce both cost and food waste.</p> <p>We will continue to promote the Want not Waste shop to all staff, student, and members of the public. The shop's volunteers continue with their aim to make zero waste living affordable and accessible to all. They also educate and share skills via free workshops and sharing meaningful content on their social media.</p> <p>+ Recycle4GM guest blog on Want not Waste</p> | We will continue to promote the Want not Waste shop to all staff, student and members of the public. |
| Jodrell Bank Bluedot Festival |  <p>Many events, including festivals, can have large environmental impacts.</p> | <p>Since its inception, the annual Bluedot Festival has considered sustainability within its operations and waste management. As well as other sustainability initiatives, the festival has a zero waste-to-landfill policy and uses no single-use plastics.</p> <p>The Bluedot Festival Sustainability Programme was celebrated for their Outstanding Contribution to Environmental Sustainability in our 2020 Making a Difference Awards.</p> | We will continue to reduce unnecessary plastic and promote recycled content at Jodrell Bank. |
| Data collection | Data to demonstrate impact of single-use plastic reductions and inform future interventions. | <p>We eliminated 250,000 pieces of avoidable single-use plastic between 2018 – 2022</p> <p>We are on our third year of mapping our scope 3 emissions and are developing a reduction plan with a commitment to reduce the use of unnecessary consumables of which a large portion are single use plastic.</p> | We will consider quantifying progress via carbon saved through the above actions, rather than numbers of plastic items avoided. Methodologies to quantify carbon savings to be explored. |