



BEYOND plastic,

BEYOND waste

Awareness that single use vessels are a real problem is high, but there is a lot of confusion around how to best introduce solutions that work. Aqeel Kapasi takes a look at the problem.

Our awareness of the problem with plastic is ever-increasing.

Often the conversation focuses on the disposal element in terms of plastics finding their way into our rivers, beaches and oceans – to name a few of nature’s treasures. This is a major challenge we face, particularly with the increasing prevalence of microplastics as the larger plastics break down.

The *production* of plastics is also worth considering though: so many plastics are made using fossil fuels at a time when climate science is urging us to reduce our dependency on them. Even the recycling process uses resources including energy, in many cases dependent on fossil fuels again.

This should not negate the need to recycle – within a better recycling infrastructure – but to also focus on the more-important aspects further up the waste hierarchy i.e. reducing and reusing.

Simply moving from plastic packaging to, say, paper packaging for everything is not the answer either. After all, alternatives still must come from somewhere, whether that’s trees, mines or the ocean, and they may be less sustainable over their lifecycle.

Questioning if packaging is required at *all* for a specific item should be our starting point, and, if so,

how much and what it will be made up of. Using as much recycled content as possible is generally the best option instead of using new materials, even if they are from ‘sustainable sources’.

Compostable materials (degradable and biodegradable mean different things!) are sometimes framed as the solution in industry to single-use plastics. Whilst they do work successfully in some places, by and large the infrastructure to break down these materials industrially is not in place *consistently* across the UK and often they will end up with general waste in landfill, resulting in more harm. The same goes for our current recycling infrastructure, with much of our plastics (and electronic waste) being shipped to less-industrialised countries, where they end up causing further health and environmental problems. Thus, again, focusing on reduction of consumption should be the priority, with the reuse of existing materials secondary.

Given our student audience, it is worth noting how important students are in terms of sustainable behaviour change, as they are often in a moment of change when they arrive at university, and purchasing and lifestyle habits they pick up then may well last them a lifetime.

The solutions are well-documented and some more relevant to our sector are listed on the next page.

Potential actions to consider:

1. Assessing use of single-use materials across sites
2. Opening a zero-waste outlet or, if not possible, a zero-waste stand within an existing outlet
 - a. If you've already got a zero-waste shop, partnering with another outlet e.g. bar, to provide bar snacks
3. Considering stocking more ethical suppliers, including products that contain less packaging
4. Changing pricing structure to include levies for disposable use and discounts for reusables, whether that's students bringing their own or under an SU-run scheme
 - a. For cold and hot drinks
 - b. For takeaway food e.g. promoting reusable containers
 - c. For cutlery, straws, tissues
 - d. For bags
5. Phasing out disposable use of above items coupled with informative campaigns
6. Implementing refill stations for commonly-bought cleaning products, and working with SU cleaners to ensure they do the same
7. Exploring drinks dispensers in a retail setting instead of plastic bottles (contact us for this – would be great to do a pilot!)
8. Removing freebies/giveaways that include items that are only likely to be used a few times and then discarded
9. Composting any food waste by working with a waste contractor that can collect and compost it, or investing in an industrial composter on-site
10. Using loose tea in bulk instead of teabags
11. Promoting tooth tablets instead of toothpaste
12. Exploring milk delivery in returnable glass bottles from a local supplier
13. Exploring dispensers for milk and other common dairy products

Note: disposables should be made available at no extra cost for those who need them.

For any comments, questions or support, please contact Aqeel.Kapasi@sos-uk.org

