



Waste Prevention **BRIEFING**

Waste prevention and reduction

Summary

- **The most resource-efficient way to reduce waste is to prevent waste from occurring in the first place:** Reducing avoidable waste is more efficient and environmentally-friendly than recycling.
- **The government is committed to cutting waste:** Local authorities have a vital role to play in meeting government targets to eliminate avoidable plastic waste by 2042 and half residual waste by 2042.
- **There are lots of resources available to support you and your residents to reduce their waste:** From conducting a council-wide waste audit to integrating waste into your procurement process, there are lots of ways for local councillors to reduce waste.

Background

- **Prevention in the waste hierarchy:** The “[waste hierarchy](#)” ranks waste management options according to what is best for the environment. It gives top priority to preventing waste in the first place and managing most sustainably the waste that remains. Actions to prevent or reduce waste can include consumers planning purchases in advance so they only buy what they need, hiring a service rather than buying the equipment, or manufacturers redesigning their product or service to use less material in its design and manufacture.
- **The scale of the problem:** According to the latest available data, the UK produced [27 million tonnes of waste](#) across all streams in 2020, a figure which has remained relatively stable for over half a decade. Around 45% of this waste is recycled, a rate which has plateaued for several years. While more can, and is, being done to increase recycling rates, not every source of waste can or should be recycled when it is possible to prevent the waste from occurring in the first place.
- **Waste reduction can cut costs and save councils money:** A common cause of waste is when supply exceeds demand. This is a waste of financial as well as material resources. Making sure that your council is ordering only what is needed, based on existing data on usage, will help to reduce this gap and save the council money. This can be applied across the council, from the stationery cupboard to the canteen.

Government policy

- **The Government’s [Waste and Resources Strategy](#)** aims to prevent waste occurring in the first place where possible and to adhere to the waste hierarchy.
- **The 25 Year Environment Plan 2018 included a commitment to eliminate avoidable plastic waste by 2042:** So far, the government has ended the sale of some

commonly littered and problematic single-use plastic items, such as straws, stirrers and cotton buds. In January 2023, [Defra announced](#) it would also end the sale of plastic plates, trays, bowls, cutlery, balloon sticks, and certain types of polystyrene cups and food containers. Other polluting items under consideration are wet wipes, tobacco filters and sachets, following a recent [call for evidence](#).

- **Defra has set a legal target under the Environment Act to reduce residual waste by 50% by 2042 from 2019 levels (excluding major mineral waste):** Residual waste is the waste that is left once the recyclable waste has been separated in accordance with the waste hierarchy. Environment Act provisions to improve recycling in England, such as the deposit return scheme and standardised rules for waste collection, will help to reduce residual waste by ensuring that more waste is recycled. But encouraging more waste prevention - reducing the volume of waste being created in the first place - is the most efficient way of making progress toward the government's target and broader waste objectives.

Ideas and resources

- **Conduct a council-wide waste audit:** Data can help to change behaviours by simply alerting people to the scale of the problem. For example, data on waste collected by local authorities has radically improved through the creation of the [WasteDataFlow](#) system. By conducting an audit of the types of waste being created and why, councils can unpick this data to help to determine what the council is currently wasting, either directly or through the services it provides to local residents. Once the scale of waste is revealed, it is possible to determine what can be reduced and what can be eliminated altogether. Whether looking at the council as a whole, or honing in on specific departments and locations such as the canteen, there are lots of opportunities for councils to evaluate their own waste and put strategies in place to reduce it.
- **Make use of City to Sea's resources and its Refill campaign:** City to Sea provides resources and information on the benefits of refill models including a guide on [how to install water fountains](#), [how to introduce reuse to council-led and council-approved events](#), and advice on [how councils can establish refill](#) more generally. Each Summer, City to Sea also hosts an annual [World Refill Day](#) campaign which provides lots of resources, including a social media toolkit, to help you to celebrate too.
- **Embed waste reduction in your sustainable procurement strategy:** Including waste reduction and prevention measures in this strategy can take many forms. For example, it could mean including a formal consideration of whether the items and quantities being ordered are "essential", whether the item can be hired or borrowed, and whether there are longer-life products available. Many suppliers feel it can be difficult to get the public sector to agree to innovative solutions, so [the government is encouraging](#) local authorities to

better engage with suppliers on how to meet their procurement needs. Another option is to actively support low waste and zero-waste brands through your procurement process. Working with more local businesses where you may be better able to communicate your desire for less waste could also help.

- **Assess the use of physical documents and go digital where possible:** In today's digital world, it is possible to cut out unnecessary printing in favour of digitising records and correspondence. It is important to ensure that your work is still accessible for all but, where possible, digitalisation is more resource efficient. This could be as simple as setting a policy of not printing receipts as the default rather than vice versa, for example.

Conservative case studies

- **Councils across the country are installing water fountains to reduce the use of plastic bottles:** Between 2004 and 2019, demand for bottled water doubled. This has contributed to the overall demand for disposable plastic bottles, which totals around 13 million bottles each year in the UK. Enabling people to refill their own water bottles on the go cuts the need for disposable water bottles. Councils across the country, such as [Hillingdon](#) and [Wiltshire](#), are partnering with their local water company to install water fountains in communal areas. [Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole Council](#) has partnered with [City to Sea](#) to line its 15-mile coastline with water fountains in an effort to reduce the [2,000 tonnes of rubbish](#) that was being littered on their beaches each year and costing the council £1 million to remove. Refill has put together a comprehensive [how-to guide for installing water fountains](#) locally.
- **Worcestershire County Council promotes local zero waste businesses on its website:** As well as adopting reuse strategies for your internal waste management, as information hubs council websites and social media channels provide excellent spaces to promote local businesses that have adopted zero waste and waste reduction initiatives. As part of your wider business engagement work, you can also direct local businesses to the resources listed in this toolkit to show them how they can reduce their waste.
- **Hillingdon London Borough Council calls on residents to take part in a Zero Waste Challenge:** The challenge encourages residents to take part in a month-long challenge to reduce their general waste in just a matter of weeks. Residents that sign up to the challenge on the council's website receive weekly emails with advice on how to reduce waste, reuse items and recycle at home. The council also held local drop-in events for residents to learn more about reuse.



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