

EPA Green Enterprise

Project: A deposit-return system for cafés and restaurants

Company: Zerowaste.ie trading as Returnr Ireland • Reference: 2019-ET-CP-99

Project Objective:

To pilot a deposit-return system for reusable cups and food bowls for café and restaurant takeaways.

Amount Of Grant Aid Awarded: €52,628



Background:

This project aimed to research and pilot a deposit-return system for reusable cups and food bowls with food supply companies who would offer them to the public as an alternative to the usual disposable options. The aim was to develop more sustainable habits for consumers in their day-to-day behaviour and to help phase out single use food-related packaging in this sector.

By piloting the scheme, it was hoped to demonstrate that restaurants, cafés and the public would 'buy in' to preventing waste when more sustainable alternatives were readily available for take-away food and drinks.



THE REUSE OF MATERIALS AND THE PHASING OUT OF A CULTURE OF DISPOSABILITY IS A PRIORITY FOR THE EU AND IRELAND.

Project activities:

Four businesses trialled reusables under the project.

The project carried out research into deposit-return schemes which have been successful in other countries. An effective system should have: a technology-based tracking system, the right food container material and size, a reliable container source, a suitable lid system, an acceptable deposit amount for consumers, and a viable hygiene/cleaning technology.

With this research Zerowaste.ie took the scheme to a concept phase and then offered food bowls to restaurants and cafés in the Dublin region to monitor its success.

The design results of the research led to: twin walled stainless steel containers in 700ml and 1000ml sizes; a deposit amount of €6; cardboard disposable lids provided free of charge or reusable triton lids sold; and containers dishwasher-cleaned between uses by partner businesses following HACCP procedures.



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The arrival of Covid-19 in March 2020 heavily impacted on the pilot scheme, with some companies closing or not offering reusable options. However, eventually, when the project ended in April 2021, four businesses had signed up to the scheme in five locations and continue to offer reusable alternatives. Reusable coffee cups are now also being offered as well as food bowls and the uptake of this is high.

Project impact:

Since the project ended, Returnr Ireland is growing. Fourteen companies in four locations (Dublin, Galway, Mayo, and Kildare) are now offering the Returnr Ireland deposit-return scheme.

This growth shows a market for this more sustainable alternative, as businesses and customers realise that change is needed.

The co-funding under EPA Green Enterprise kick-started this development and was very beneficial to show the circular economy in action.

The project has shown that the concept of deposit-return schemes in relation to food and drink is viable in Ireland at scale, with an appetite in the trade and from customers for such alternatives.



Next steps needed: More schemes to implement deposit-return options need to be supported along with awareness raising programmes and some economic incentives. It will take time to achieve mainstream adoption. A widescale implementation of such a scheme in a larger hub, for example in a shopping centre with several outlets all offering an interchangeable deposit-return scheme, would be an ideal further pilot project. Other environments such as office canteens could offer such schemes to high levels of success.

Policy suggestions: The implementation of a government levy on single use takeaway food packaging (similar to the levy planned for single use beverage containers) would have a major beneficial impact on such schemes and eventually lead to mainstream adoption.

For more on the EPA's Green Enterprise programme visit [here](#)

For outputs see: www.instagram.com/returnrireland/ or contact: info@returnir.ie

