



SUSTAINABLE EVENT PLANNING GUIDE

ecocommunitiesuk.com



WHO ARE ECO ECOMMUNITIES?

Eco Communities UK is a community interest company based in Chester, founded in 2018. We work across Cheshire to make sustainable living practical, affordable, and genuinely accessible – through refill and reuse infrastructure, clothes repair workshops, circular economy education, and community events. We run Full Circle Refill & Reuse Hubs, support regions and businesses with Plastic Free Community accreditations through Surfers Against Sewage, and organise events like Chester Green Festival to connect people with local sustainability organisations, makers, and changemakers.

Our events are free to attend. As a CIC, we're funding-led rather than sponsorship-driven, which means we keep stall rates affordable and make deliberate choices about every aspect of how we run, including the events themselves.

We believe that how we gather matters. Our venue choices prioritise accessibility by public transport, bike, or foot. Our event planning is guided by the same principles we champion year-round: reduce first, reuse where possible, and only then recycle.



How we plan our events

For community gatherings like ours, we focus on four core areas:

- Food & drink – what's on offer and how it's served
- Water – access to free drinking water and reducing single-use bottles
- Waste – sorting, reducing, and what happens after the event
- Packaging – expectations for stallholders and caterers

Larger events may also need to consider energy and power consumption, transport logistics, and supplier sourcing, but this guide focuses on the community-scale events.

EVENT FOOD

A plant-based diet is much more environmentally friendly, plus think about locally and seasonal.

Food is one of the most visible parts of any event, and one of the easiest places to make a positive difference. At our events, we ask that catering is entirely or predominantly plant-based. This isn't about excluding anyone – it's about using the event as a chance to showcase just how good plant-based food can be.

We prioritise working with local food businesses who share our values. To be invited as a caterer or food stallholder at a Sustainable Cheshire event, businesses should encourage businesses to also try for one of the following criteria:

- Become part of our Plastic Free Cheshire project
 - Support Chester Zoo's Sustainable Palm Oil initiative
 - Their menu is at least 25% plant-based
- Once businesses meet one or more of these criteria they can also be listed as a Sustainable Cheshire Recommended Business – a small but meaningful recognition that helps conscious consumers find them year-round.

Food Waste

Our vendors tend to plan well and finish the day with very little left over. But when surplus food does arise, we encourage vendors to donate to a local food bank or sign up to Too Good to Go, so nothing goes to waste unnecessarily.



Fact - to produce a pound of beef it takes 1,799 gallons of water and releases about 22 lbs of carbon.



Too Good To Go

WATER

We all need water every day.

Clean drinking water is something most of us take for granted at home, and we think that shouldn't change when you're out and about. Water should be free, full stop.

We're proud to be the Chester contact for Refill, the national campaign that asks businesses to open their doors to anyone needing to top up their water bottle — and to list themselves on the Refill App so people can find them easily.

At our events, we ensure that free drinking water is always available for attendees to refill their own bottles. We'd encourage every stallholder and caterer to do the same.

There are no single-use plastic water bottles at our events. If you're coming along, bring a reusable bottle — and if you forget, just ask.



PACKAGING

The way we package things on the go in the UK needs a serious rethink. When people are out at events they want convenience, but a growing number of visitors are also paying close attention to what an event is actually doing about sustainability. Packaging is one of the most visible signals you send.

Understanding the Waste Hierarchy is a good starting point. Reduce comes before reuse, reuse before recycle — and recycling, while valuable, is not the easy win it's often presented as.

Why recycling alone isn't enough

Recycling does matter. Increasing recycling rates across household, commercial, and industrial waste could avoid billions of tonnes of carbon dioxide emissions between now and 2050, a significant contribution to tackling climate change and reducing pressure on finite resources.

But not all materials are created equal when it comes to recycling, and this is where packaging choices at events really count.

Fact - Music Festivals, on average, generate 23,500 tonnes of waste which includes plastic bottles, food waste, abandoned tents and clothing. (@bbc)

PACKAGING CONTINUED



Plastic is the problem material. Most disposable plastics are difficult to recycle, costly to process, and a genuine headache for waste management providers. Of the plastic that does get recycled, much of it can only go through the process a handful of times before it degrades, and at the end of that chain, you get microplastics. We won't go into the full horror of microplastics here, but trust us, it's not good. Even when producers use recycled plastic content, a large proportion gets downcycled into lower-value products like garden furniture rather than back into comparable packaging.

Glass and metal are a different story. Aluminium cans and glass bottles can be recycled repeatedly without significant loss of quality – in theory, indefinitely. They are the clear winners when it comes to on-the-go packaging.

What this means for our events

Where food and drink is served at our events, we ask vendors to choose glass or metal over plastic wherever possible. Reusable serviceware is always preferable to any single-use alternative, but if single-use is unavoidable, material choice matters enormously.

We encourage all stallholders to review their packaging before arriving and, where possible, to be part of our Plastic Free Cheshire project. Small changes across multiple stalls add up to a very different kind of event.



PACKAGING COMPOSTABLES

Compostable packaging sounds like the ideal solution. It's not plastic, it breaks down naturally, and the name suggests it simply disappears into the earth without a trace. If only it were that straightforward.

The reality is more complicated, and at our events, we don't recommend it.

The infrastructure problem

Most compostable packaging requires industrial composting conditions to break down properly, specific temperatures, humidity levels, and timescales that simply don't exist in a home compost bin or in the natural environment. If compostable packaging ends up in general waste, it goes to landfill, where it breaks down anaerobically and can produce methane. If it ends up in recycling, it contaminates the load. Or it can go to incineration and all those extra costs for the packaging goes up in smoke.

At a community event, we cannot guarantee access to industrial composting facilities. Without the right end-of-life infrastructure, compostable packaging doesn't deliver on its promise.



The confusion factor

Compostable and recyclable items look almost identical to the untrained eye. When they're mixed together — which at a busy event they inevitably will be — both streams are compromised. Recycling facilities increasingly reject loads contaminated with compostable materials, meaning more ends up in landfill than if neither had been used.

The greenwashing risk

We're also cautious about the signal compostable packaging sends. It can give vendors and visitors alike a sense that the packaging problem has been solved, when in reality it has just been reframed. The better question is always: can we avoid single-use altogether?

What we recommend instead

Reusable always wins. After that, glass and metal. Compostable packaging, despite its good intentions, currently creates more problems than it solves in a community event context, and we'd rather be honest about that than tick a box that doesn't hold up to scrutiny.

WASTE

Reduce, Reuse, Recycle

The sustainable ideal is a circular economy – where nothing is wasted, everything has a next life, and single-use is simply not part of the equation. In practice, we know that's easier said than done, and we won't pretend we've cracked the zero-waste event yet. But that doesn't mean we stop trying. Every event we run follows the principle of reduce, reuse, recycle – in that order. Reduction comes first. Reuse wherever possible. Recycling as a last resort, not a get-out clause.

On the day

Proper waste segregation is a must. We ensure events have clearly labelled, strategically placed bins for:

- Dry recycling (paper, card, aluminium cans, plastics where accepted)
- Wet waste / food waste
- General waste



Bins should be colour-coded and positioned where people naturally pause – near food areas, exits, and seating. Poorly signed bins mean mixed waste, which often means landfill.

For stallholders

We encourage all stallholders to consider how they present information. Printed leaflets and brochures are often picked up and binned within the hour – a QR code linking to an online version is better for the planet and often more useful for the visitor.

We also encourage every stall to be part of our Plastic Free Cheshire project. It's a straightforward commitment that signals to visitors you're thinking beyond the event itself.

Fact - Music Festivals, on average, generate 23,500 tonnes of waste which includes plastic bottles, food waste, abandoned tents and clothing. (@bbc)

REUSABLES

We need to think circular economy

Switching from single-use to reusable cups and serviceware is one of the most impactful changes an event can make, reducing plastic production, cutting waste, and sending a clear message to attendees about what kind of event this is.

The challenge? Most of us still aren't in the habit. We leave the house with keys 🗝️, phone 📱, cards 💳 — and the reusable cup stays on the kitchen counter. ❌

Changing that habit takes time, but events are actually a brilliant place to nudge it along, because the infrastructure is right there, and the choice is made easy.

Hot drinks — the coffee cup problem
In 2019, over 10 million people bought a hot drink from a coffee shop in the UK — the vast majority served in a single-use cup. For Cheshire West alone, that equates to an estimated 55,000 cups, most of which will have gone straight to landfill. Why? Because fewer than 1% of single-use coffee cups are actually recycled. Most are a composite of paper and plastic bonded together, which requires specialist facilities that are simply not widely available.



Cold drinks - for cold drinks, we run our own returnable cup scheme at events. It's simple, low-faff, and it works:

Order — Attendees pay a small deposit to use a returnable cup for their drink. No single-use cup changes hands.

Drink — The cup can be reused for refills throughout the event.

Return — At the end of the event, attendees bring their cup back to the Eco Communities stall and choose one of two options:

- Donate the deposit to support our work.
- Reclaim the deposit as a full refund

It's a model that works at community scale, keeps cups in circulation, and gives people a tangible way to be part of the solution, even if they forgot their own cup at home.

We hire our our Hot drinks cups, Pint, ½ Pint and Wine glasses to events in the region.

See more here:



PLANNING YOUR EVENT

Before your event, take a step back and think through everything that will be used on the day – and where it ends up afterwards. Waste doesn't just happen at the end of an event; it's built into every decision you make in the planning stage.

Work through this list and ask yourself honestly: do we need it, and if so, can we do it differently?

- Plastic glasses
- Single-use coffee cups
- Takeaway containers
- Napkins
- Paper tickets
- Balloons
- Single-use decorations
- Paper tablecloths
- Paper straws (plastic straws are now banned in the UK, but paper isn't necessarily the answer either)
- Single-use cutlery (this includes bamboo and anything labelled biodegradable, without industrial composting facilities, it goes to landfill or incineration)
- Giveaway items (promotional freebies are almost always thrown away within days of an event, think carefully before ordering them)

For each item on the list, ask:

- Could it be switched to a reusable alternative?
- Could we just decide not to use it at all?

Reduce first. Reuse where you can. Recycle only as a last resort.

Where does your waste actually go?

Most people assume waste goes to landfill if it isn't recycled. In reality, since the UK government introduced significant landfill taxes, the more likely destination is incineration. That's not a solution – it's just a different kind of problem.

Do you know who collects your event waste, and what they actually do with it? It's worth asking. A waste contractor who can genuinely demonstrate recycling rates and responsible disposal is worth seeking out.

Your vendors matter too

Waste doesn't begin at your event, it begins with how your suppliers source and deliver their products. Encourage the vendors you work with to consider their own packaging, sourcing, and delivery practices, and where possible choose those who already have sustainability policies in place.

SUSTAINABLE EVENT CHECK LIST

Use this checklist whether you're organising an event or running a stall. The more boxes you can tick, the better, but don't be discouraged if you can't tick them all straight away. Progress matters.

For Event Organisers

Venue & Access

- Venue is accessible by public transport, bike, or on foot
- Cycling facilities available (bike racks or secure storage)
- Venue has access to mains water for free refill points
- Waste facilities are available for proper segregation on site

Water

- Free drinking water is available for attendees to refill their own bottles
- Single-use plastic water bottles are not on sale at the event
- Refill points are clearly signed

Waste Management

- Clearly labelled, colour-coded bins are in place for dry recycling, food waste, and general waste
- Bins are positioned strategically near food areas, exits, and seating
- You know what your waste contractor does with what they collect
- A named person is responsible for monitoring waste stations on the day

Catering & Packaging

- All caterers have been briefed on your packaging and waste expectations
- No single-use plastic cups, cutlery, or containers on site
- A reusable cup scheme is in place for hot and/or cold drinks
- Compostable packaging has been actively discouraged
- Food surplus plan is in place (food bank donation or Too Good to Go)

Communications

- Attendees have been informed in advance about the event's eco aims
- Sustainability information is visible on the day (signage, printed guide, or QR code)
- Stallholders have received a sustainability briefing before the event
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SUSTAINABLE STALL CHECK LIST

For Stallholders — Food & Drink

Packaging

- No single-use plastic packaging, cups, or cutlery in use
- Serving in reusable, glass, or metal alternatives where possible
- Compostable packaging avoided — if single-use is unavoidable, use paper or foil
- Condiments served in bulk dispensers rather than single-use sachets

Menu

- Menu is entirely or predominantly plant-based
- Meets at least one Sustainable Cheshire criterion (Plastic Free Cheshire / Chester Zoo Sustainable Palm Oil / 25%+ plant-based menu)

Waste

- Surplus food plan in place (food bank, Too Good to Go, or similar)
- Waste segregated correctly into the event's bin system
- Packaging and supplies brought to the event are minimal and necessary
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For Stallholders — Products & Activities

Packaging & Display

- No single-use plastic bags — paper, reusable, or bring-your-own encouraged
- Product packaging is minimal, recyclable, or reusable
- Promotional materials use recycled or sustainably sourced paper, or none at all
- QR codes used in place of printed leaflets and brochures where possible
- No balloons, glitter, or single-use decorative items on your stall

Products

- Products or services align with sustainable living values
- Giveaway items have been reconsidered — if used, they are genuinely useful and durable

General

- You are part of, or working towards joining, the Plastic Free Cheshire project
- Your stall travel to the event is as low-carbon as possible (public transport, shared vehicle, electric)

A final thought

No event is perfect, and no stall gets every box ticked first time. What matters is the direction of travel. If you're making more sustainable choices this event than last time, that's real progress — and that's what Sustainable Cheshire's Project by Eco Communities is here to support.

Eco Communities a not-for-profit organisation. We have many projects including Sustainable Cheshire. We want to support sustainability with our region. If you have any questions email office@sustainablecheshire.uk Helen Tandy, Director Eco Communities

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