

How to implement a reusable lunchbox scheme – from those that tried and failed!

CRP worked with the support of London Borough of Islington and angel.london to try to implement a reusable container scheme. This would have involved working with food vendors, restaurants, and cafes in Chapel Market to provide takeaway lunches in reusable containers, for local office workers in the area.



Unfortunately, CRP were unable to implement this reusable container scheme due to the logistical impacts of the pandemic, but we are keen to share lessons from what we learned during the process so that BIDs and local authorities can use it to help set up their own circular economy scheme. The intervention would have had substantial benefits for sustainability, whilst improving air quality by fewer deliveries, fewer waste collections and reduced congestion. If successful, it could be a valuable way for BIDs and local authorities to meet their environmental objectives.



The circular economy pilot project, as originally conceived, would have pioneered a reusable food container scheme within the Angel BID area resulting in sustainability benefits to office-based employees, local food providers and the wider Angel community, primarily through reduced waste of single use items.

Whilst the dramatic effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on working practices (i.e. working from home etc.) meant that the pilot project did not come to fruition within the given timescale, many learnings were made in the development of the pilot and we very much hope to revisit it in the future should funding become available."

**Mark Turner, Environmental Manager,
angel.london**

Key Takeaways



The key takeaway from this circular economy project was the importance of understanding the local area and securing a participating group of employers or workers as early as possible in the project.



Circular economy schemes may reduce waste but can have a significant impact on sustainable transport, air quality and many other key sustainability challenges, so implementing a holistic circular economy scheme should be an absolute priority.

5 Lessons Learnt

1

Pick your problem



Office lunches were clearly identified as a source of too much waste, recycling, vehicle journeys, congestion and pollution in the local area by the local authority and the BID. This meant the London Borough of Islington and angel.london clearly identified that a reusable lunchbox would be most beneficial to the area. However, an area with lots of cafes may want to consider a reusable coffee cup scheme, which are becoming more common around London.

2

Set your scheme



Reusable container schemes can take many forms. They can be informal, such as asking your local café to use your own cup, instead of their disposable option. They can be app-based, such as a business joining the Refill app. They can be community-led, such as Shrewsbury Cup's pioneering coffee cup scheme that involves a £1 deposit that is returned when the cup is dropped off at a local, participating café. They can also be led by a third-party provider, such as Junee, where they provide clearly signposted bins to dispose of the reusable lunch containers; containers are then collected, cleaned and returned to the participating food businesses by electric vehicle, where they will be reused, creating a circular system. This attention to sustainability detail by including air quality as a key priority in this reusable container schemes made it favourable to work with Junee. The circular economy is a hugely diversified industry, so being clear on the type of scheme you want to implement in your area is key.

5

It is a new Industry!



Many circular economy start-ups are operating in different areas across London, meaning there is plenty of innovation, but strategies and plans can change quickly. Many of these organisations are run by sustainability enthusiasts with less than five staff, therefore expansion may not have been suitable for these organisations, especially when not deemed permanent as the length of the trial was three months. Making sure there are back-up options and contingency plans in place will ensure that the project goes ahead, and utilise expertise in your local area (e.g.. ReLondon, The Ellen McArthur Foundation).

4

Understand your market



Understanding your market is critical. The London Borough of Islington and angel.london were extremely useful in identifying sustainability enthused businesses that would potentially be interested in a trial. CRP's project partner, Junee, supplemented this with additional franchises of businesses they already worked with. This created a clear pool of potentially interested organisations before an office or group of individuals was even identified.

3

Visit your site



COVID-19 brought challenges to the project that could have provided foresight for some of the problems that arose later. CRP was delivering the project virtually and site visits and in-person visits were only considered from March 2022, to avoid the spread of coronavirus. Site visits and conversations with local offices confirmed that the return to office, in-person working had not been prevalent in Angel. Had this been found out earlier, a new solution could have been identified that supported the local area.

This was undertaken as part of Clean Air Villages 4, a Defra-funded project led by Westminster City Council in collaboration with 26 project partners to improve the air quality across different London 'villages', where both air pollution and population density levels are high.

For more information on Clean Air Villages 4 and CRP's other work please see the CRP website or connect via social media. CRP's August Connect 4 session looks in more detail at reusable container schemes with junee - watch it here.

For more information on this scheme, please email CRP Sustainable Transport Manager Ross Phillips.

