

WILLOWBRIDGE SCHOOL IS TACKLING PLASTIC

We've known about the devastating impact of plastics for more than a decade. It's polluting our oceans, killing wildlife and damaging our health. Yet our consumption of plastic continues to increase! Not all plastics are bad however. It's our misuse of plastic that's the problem.

Schools play an important part in educating children about pointless plastics, so we were delighted when **Willowbridge School** signed up to make their 'Plastic Promise' back in December 2019. Willowbridge one of 70+ schools in Northern Ireland that is committed to reducing their plastic footprint.

The Tackling Plastic NI team spoke to teacher and Eco-Schools advocate **Finessa Wallace** to see how Willowbridge has been getting on with their 'Plastic Promise' journey...

How did Willowbridge School's 'Tackling Plastic' journey begin?

Willowbridge is a relatively new school and was only established in 2012. It became apparent very quickly that we were using a huge amount of plastic on a daily basis; although we didn't have the where-with-all to do anything about it. To try to figure out where we could start, I phoned our local Council adviser, Claire McDermott, who was outstanding in both her advice as well as her support throughout our journey. As a result, **we made the decision to aim for a Green Flag last year as a means of placing some structure on both our needs and expectations.** We thought that choosing 'Waste' as our main topic would help. Having set up a functional system, we decided that we needed to **focus on 'Single-Use Plastics'**. Things evolved very naturally after that.

What efforts has the school made to tackle pointless plastic?

As 2020 was our first year of Eco-Schools, we had to start from scratch. Our first step was to evaluate where we were in order to draw up a policy on where we wanted to go. We introduced a **bin recycling system and set up our Eco Team** as well as Eco Detectives to monitor and keep on top of recycling in school. We **even have our own school mascot Eco-Ernie** to motivate and encourage everyone to keep recycling! Our senior classes monitor waste and keep us posted as to the weight of all recyclables - this is then displayed on our Eco board.



We have also employed a very proactive approach to caring for our environment and **have entered every competition we possibly could**, represented the school at local events, completed whole school training sessions, got the entire school involved in **producing a school leaflet on avoiding single-use plastics**, started our school Facebook page to promote caring for our environment and reducing all waste, embedded recycling in the curriculum across the school, and involved parents in the process as best we could, bearing in mind the present circumstances surrounding Covid.

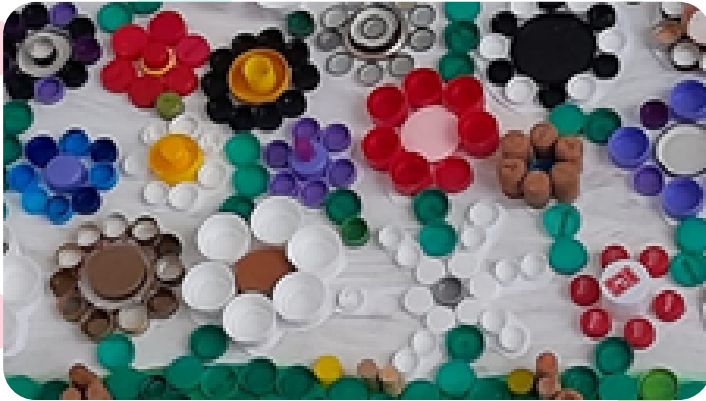
Our local Council (Fermanagh and Omagh District Council) has been very proactive in the school and Claire, Sarah Jane and Emma have been a great support. NI Water has also been heavily involved in teaching us all about water and the damage done by single-use plastics. They supplied every member of our school community with water bottles and came to speak at our assemblies and staff training sessions. **It's now school policy to use reusable bottles within school.**

One competition example was the 'Young Reporters for the Environment' competition with numerous individual entries from the school, although we also collated our individual photographs of all the plastic rubbish lying about on our short walk to our local castle. The organisers of the competition (Keep Northern Ireland Beautiful) are currently displaying this piece in their main foyer. Thanks to the engagement of staff in school we have also won a trip to Oxford Island nature reserve and £250 to spend on environmental projects. We'll definitely keep entering competitions!



Current trends in Education are to move away from brightly coloured, plastic furniture and toys and towards a more neutral and natural learning environment, something we have been embracing in our Early Years and Primary Departments here in Willowbridge. Studies have proven that these sort of learning environments are more calming and conducive to learning so in TEACCH 1 for example, **we have wooden tables/chairs/partitions and where possible we have wooden toys rather than plastic.** This was a conscious decision to opt for wooden vehicles, garage, fire station rather than plastic. We also try to **order from businesses that promote natural materials or recycled plastic items where possible** because of the longevity of products and positive impact on the environment. This is embedded in our school policy and school development plan.

All our paper in school is recycled but thankfully our Art Coordinator, Mrs Maxwell, is a bit of a magpie and is regularly sending out SOS's to **gather up cartons, bottles, bottle tops, paint brushes etc. for use in school projects.** We're in the process of making a large piece of 'lid art' which will be designed by the seniors on the theme 'we love our world'. The idea is to display it in a public place for all to see how beautiful recycled art can be. Below is an example of a piece on display within Willowbridge at present using bottle tops, jam jar lids and recycled paper.



Even **Environment and Society lessons will only ever use recycled items** (see below) which is based around a recycled plastic pallet. Two of our pupils, Leah and Brad, represented our school just before the pandemic, at a 'Youth Speak' conference in Irvinestown. The theme was the use of 'Single-Use Plastics' and was very well received by all present.

Future projects will include completing our Litterless Campaign programme, the Great Big Spring Clean, a visit to our local recycling plant to see what happens to our plastics, a 'Sport Top' day and a Fashion Show using only recycled products from plastic. **Overall we found that once we realised the extent of the problem, coming up with ideas in school was the easy bit,** and our Eco Team was very diligent!



How have tackling plastic efforts been received by Willowbridge pupils and staff?

There are times that I worry I am tormenting my colleagues with ideas, trips, assemblies, training, initiatives and workshops! So far, they have been absolutely outstanding in their commitment to everything. There also needs to be a special thanks our Principal, Mrs Bernie Cornyn, and our Senior Management Team who have been 100% behind every initiative. A special thanks also needs to go to Mrs Rita Cooper (our BoG rep) and Mr Michael Martin (our parent rep) who are always giving up their valuable time and help in any way they can. We are very lucky here in so far as **we are very proactive in Willowbridge when it comes to caring for our environment**, and the staff have been very quick to step up and offer their time, energy, expertise and advice.

What tackling plastic challenges have you experienced since Willowbridge make their original Plastic Promise in December 2019?

My main worry was adding to the incredible burden already on staff but thankfully they have really embraced everything we are trying to do. My only other concern was time; there just never seems to be enough of it!

What's ahead for the pupils of Willowbridge School?

Our main objective is to **educate everyone in our school community about plastics** as well as reducing all excess plastic. I would also love to develop our presence on Social Media and it would also be really good to link up with another school in the area to undertake some fun tackling plastic initiatives in the future!

Inspired by Willowbridge School?

Sign up to the Plastic Promise today!

[Click here](#) to make your Plastic Promise.

Keep up the good work!

The Tackling Plastic NI team