

# ST. COLM'S HIGH 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 **St. Colm's High School in Draperstown** signed up to make their 'Plastic Promise' back in July 2019. St. Colm's is one of 70+ schools in Northern Ireland that is committed to reducing their plastic footprint.

The Tackling Plastic NI team spoke to Science teacher and Eco-Schools advocate **Clare Devlin** to see how St. Colm's has been getting on with their 'Plastic Promise' journey...



## How did St. Colm's 'Tackling Plastic' journey begin?

For 20+ years, our pupils have been carrying out litter blitzes in our parish, discussing the effects of litter and the need to use less and recycle. Pupils widened their actions to care for the environment in 2006-7, their first year of the [Eco-School's](#) programme. Pupils held an Eco Fair in May 2007, inviting eco-friendly businesses, environmental organisations and primary schools from Mid-Ulster to learn more about how they could help the environment. Suggestions to tackle plastic included using 'Bags for life' and reusable water bottles.

Then in 2010, pupils joined Shirley Lewis, 'the bag lady' in Stormont to promote the actions taken by St. Colm's to live as sustainably as possible. They were joined by other schools and MLA's. Throughout this school year they hosted an information presentation for local primary schools and local councillors on their simple sustainable life actions 'give up one thing' e.g. plastic bags in shops and 'take up one thing' e.g. bags for life. **Pupils won an All-Ireland Eco-UNESCO award** for their actions on climate solutions through sustainable life changes. They encouraged politicians, staff, and pupils in all schools to sign up to this. 76% of the school community signed up to make one simple lifestyle change; this included efforts to tackle pointless plastic.

When the carrier bag levy was introduced in Northern Ireland in 2013, St. Colm's was very appreciative of the grants offered by this levy. It provided financial help, alongside the 'Up for work' scheme, and grants from [LiveHereLoveHere](#) to develop our acre biodiversity site, Susan's Trail. Local families planted 255 trees in memory of loved ones in a special Area of Remembrance. For a few years from 2013 onwards, the major focus in St. Colm's eco-club was the development of this area and outdoor learning, climate change solutions, and energy efficiency. The focus on tackling plastic increased when pupils were planning actions to take for Earth Hour 2018. From then on, much more work has been done in the tackling plastics area - as you'll see below!

## What efforts has St. Colm's made to tackle pointless plastic?

Our pupils thoroughly enjoyed taking part in the annual WWF's Earth Hour and 'Wear it Wild' events, as well as competitions like 'The future We Want.' A climate change assembly in preparing for Earth Hour 2018 highlighted plastic pollution and the need to play our part.

**In June 2019, St. Colm's decided to ban single-use plastic bottles** in the next school year. During the last week of May 2019, pupils and staff collected all our plastic bottles together to record baseline usage (below left). We carried out the Eco-schools/YRE Plastic audit in June 2019, putting plans in place for the next school year. We were able to **remove plastic bottle vending machines and water machines in our staff room** and replace these with 2 Roc Bottle refill water stations kindly donated by RocBottle (see below right).



**From June 2019 to March 2020, we saw a huge reduction in other single-use plastic as well as single-use bottles which benefited the environment and brought financial savings too.** The school canteen saw an overall reduction of 42% in plastic spoons, trays, disposable soup cups and plastic bottles. There was a 40% reduction in single-use student and staff lunches boxes, 14.8% reduction in single-use plastic materials used in cleaning supplies, and 14% reduction in single-use plastic school resources. Reductions in single-use plastic in every aspect of school life happened through simple lifestyle changes, and the desire for all to do more for future generations.

In Science, Year 8 pupils carry out recycling projects in the Eco-world topic, with an increased focus now on recycling single-use plastic, e.g. making birdfeeders and windchimes from plastic bottles. In Year 10, pupils take part in the YRE competitions. In 2018 pupils were placed 3rd in the YRE reducing waste writing competition, and in **2020 pupils were placed 1st and 2nd in the reducing plastic waste YRE photography competition.**

From 2019, Year 9 pupils in Geography got involved in the BBC campaign, 'War on plastic', which has evolved into a thematic unit where pupils learn about the causes and impacts of plastic pollution and are encouraged to develop possible solutions to plastic pollution, culminating in a 'Pollution Solutions' wall display.

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

Sustainable development can be difficult to grasp but everyone, no matter how young, has a right and a responsibility to understand how their choices affect the environment, people, and wildlife both locally and globally. In St Colm's High School, we've taken a structured approach to education for sustainable development since 2006. **We wanted to inspire and support young people to embrace environmental responsibility.** By valuing our young peoples' contributions to the environment, helping them develop skills to manage difficult times and giving them pride in their town, we felt we could bring about real change. Pupils and staff have pride in their contribution to reducing plastic pollution, and striving to make a difference, believing every little bit counts. Pupils also took part in climate strikes with local primary schools in Sept 2019 and presented their Plastic Promises at Green Schools Ireland's Climate Summit in Dublin in Oct 2019.



## What tackling plastic challenges have you experienced since St. Colm's made their initial Plastic Promise in July 2019?

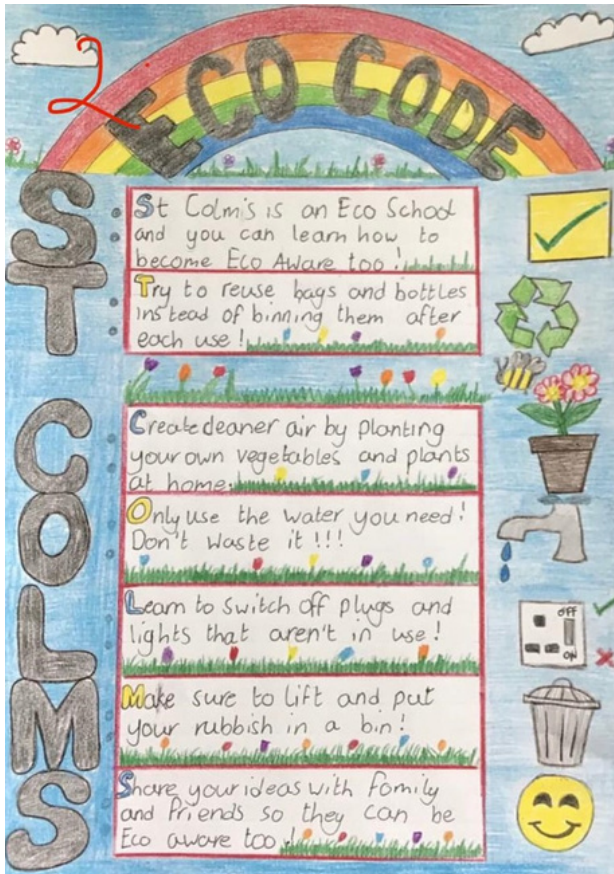
Great progress had been made on reducing plastic waste. **That was until the first lockdown occurred in March 2020! With lockdowns, and a focus on Covid-19 safety, it was hard to monitor plastic use in school as thoroughly as before.** Unfortunately, one challenge of the pandemic was an increased use of single-use PPE that was required by pupils and staff. This has temporarily impacted on the successes we had before, but we have also seen many positives in lockdown.

Pupils engaged more in outdoor activities through their Eco Goggle Classroom, making changes at home to help the environment and reduce waste. Pupils attended online eco-club meetings, Eco-Schools NI and International Eco-webinars and continued learning about actions they could take to reduce plastic pollution online. Most recently, this has been through webinars such as Eco-Schools NI and Tackling Plastic NI Webinars "Chemistry for Sustainable Plastics" with Professor Tom Welton in November 2020, and "Biodiversity and Tackling Plastics" with Sarah Roberts in March 2021 (check out these webinars [here](#)).

Pupils carried out many outdoor activities contributing to our Green Flag. They entered photographic, Eco-code and Minecraft eco-school competitions, completed Earth Hour and Woodland Trust's #30DaysWild Challenge, parish litter picks and Green Heart Heroes, mainly involving time outdoors. Pupils and parents commented on family time, enjoyment, and positive impact of connecting more with nature, and confidence developed through continuing eco-activities.



# What's ahead for the pupils of St. Colm's High School?



I hope that our pupils benefit from eco-involvement. They have developed life-skills – such as tree and hedge planting, painting fences – and are learning how to live more sustainably and economically. They have addressed audiences in school and in the local community and have even presented their eco-campaigns at Stormont! **These experiences improve public speaking and develop our young people into confident future leaders.**

St Colm's eco-committee has raised more than £60,000 from grants, obtaining matched funding from government schemes. The inclusive nature of eco-activities helps draw out children who may find elements of school life challenging.

Despite lockdown, we hope to be back on track soon, making changes to further reduce single-use plastic in school and at home, and live as sustainably as possible. **It will be time to reflect on the environmental positives of lockdown, and plan for future generations to enjoy the world.**

Inspired by the amazing achievements of St. Colm's High 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