

The packaging dilemma in Northern Ireland

Northern Ireland is grappling with significant waste management issues, especially when it comes to dealing with large amounts of low-value waste packaging¹. While recycling is important in reducing this waste, it's crucial to understand that recycling alone won't solve the packaging waste problem.

Unfortunately, most packaging is designed as single-use, and is typically thrown away rather than reused. This constant flow of waste is partly responsible for the estimated 12 million pieces of litter found on our streets at any given time in Northern Ireland as almost half of this litter is directly from packaging². This litter threatens wildlife, alters ecosystems and poses risks to human health.

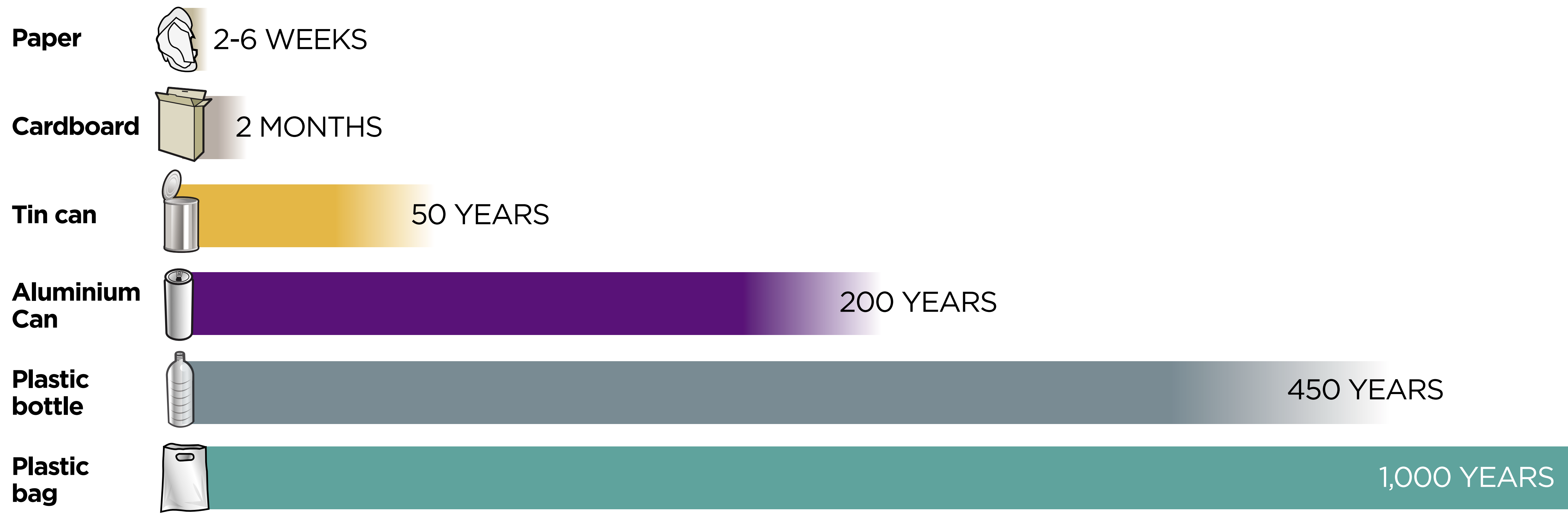
There is no easy solution to the packaging dilemma. We need to review the whole packaging process. To begin with, producing most of the conventional packaging materials utilises a lot of finite resources, including energy, water, and minerals. This production process can then generate harmful emissions including greenhouse gases, heavy metals, as well as wastewater and/or sludge containing toxic contaminants. The fact

that these items then take decades, if not centuries, to break down underscores the need for action to fight pollution and explore more environmentally friendly alternatives.

¹ <https://www.circularity-gap.world/northern-ireland#download> ² <https://keepnorthernirelandbeautiful.etinu.net/keepnorthernirelandbeautiful/documents/008834.pdf>



How long it takes for packaging to break down



Rethink materials

Sustainable packaging involves choosing materials that are environmentally responsible. This means opting for materials that are renewable, reusable or recyclable.



Renewable materials

These are materials that can be replenished naturally, like bamboo, cork, or certain types of paper. Using renewable materials helps reduce the depletion of finite resources.



Reusable materials

These are materials that can be used multiple times, reducing the need for single-use items and minimising environmental impact.

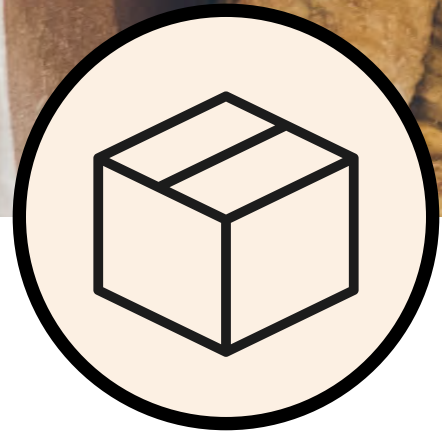


Recyclable materials

These are materials that can be easily collected and reprocessed to make new products. Examples include glass, cardboard and paper but avoid plastics where possible.

Reduce packaging

Top of the agenda is to minimise packaging to curb the excessive use of materials. The goal is to strike a balance between preserving the functionality and protection of products whilst reducing waste and environmental impact.



Streamlined packaging

Sustainable packaging encourages simplicity. This means avoiding elaborate or unnecessary packaging components that do not serve a functional purpose. By streamlining packaging, we can reduce the overall amount of materials used.



Right-sizing

Choosing the appropriate packaging size for a product is crucial. Oversized packaging not only wastes materials but also takes up more space during transportation, increasing energy consumption and costs. Right-sizing ensures that packaging matches the product's dimensions.



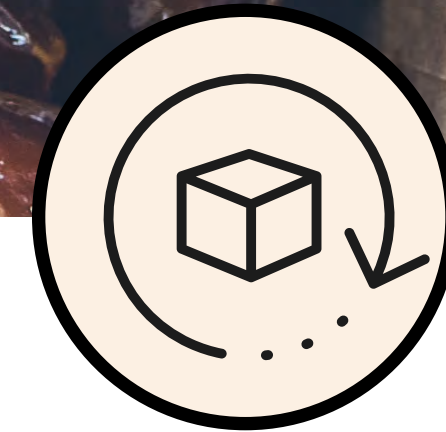
Lightweight materials

Selecting lightweight yet durable materials helps in minimising the overall weight of packaging. This is especially important for reducing transportation-related emissions and costs.



Efficient use of space

Designing packaging to efficiently use space during shipping and storage can reduce the need for additional packaging materials. Stackable or nestable packaging options are good examples of this approach.



Reusable packaging

Whenever possible, consider packaging that can be reused. This not only reduces waste but also provides long-term benefits by extending the life of packaging materials.

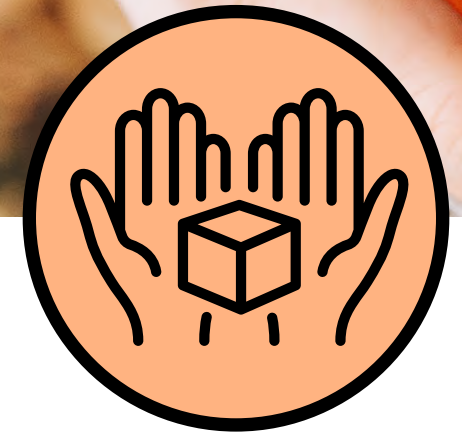
Reuse packaging

Reusing packaging champions the concept of the circular economy. Instead of discarding packaging after one use, sustainable practices promote the idea that packaging can have a longer and more meaningful lifespan.



Extend lifespan

Reusable packaging is designed to withstand multiple uses without compromising functionality or structural integrity. This longevity reduces the need for constant replacement and, in turn, conserves resources.



Reduce waste

One of the primary benefits of reuse is the reduction of waste. When consumers are encouraged to reuse packaging, it lessens the burden on landfills and minimises the environmental impact associated with disposable packaging.



Cost savings

Reusable packaging can lead to cost savings for both businesses and consumers. Businesses can reduce packaging costs by producing fewer disposable materials, while consumers can save money by not having to purchase new containers for their needs.



Environmental benefits

Reusable packaging also contributes to a decrease in the overall demand for packaging materials. This, therefore, reduces the energy and resources required for production and transportation, resulting in a lower carbon footprint.

Reduce toxicity

Reducing toxicity focuses on the health and safety of both people and the environment. This principle supports the careful selection and use of packaging materials and inks to ensure they are entirely devoid of harmful chemicals and toxins.



Human safety

Packaging materials often come into contact with the products they encase, and in some cases, with the people who handle them. By eliminating harmful chemicals from packaging materials and inks, we protect the health and well-being of consumers, workers, and anyone involved in the packaging process.



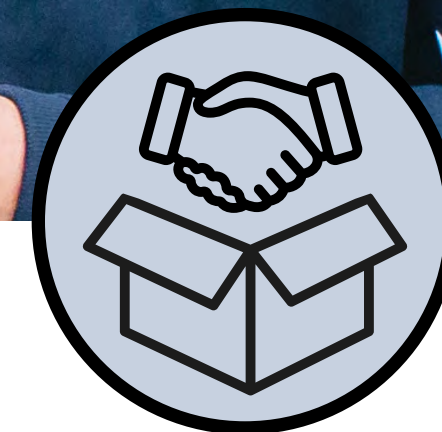
Environmental impact

Toxic chemicals can leach into the environment during the production, use, and disposal of packaging materials. This can contaminate soil, water, and air, leading to adverse ecological effects. Sustainable packaging strives to minimise such negative impacts.



Improved recycling

Harmful chemicals can hinder the recycling of packaging materials. Sustainable packaging materials are chosen not only for their lack of toxicity but also for their compatibility with recycling systems.



Consumer trust

Consumers are increasingly concerned about the safety of the products they buy, including the packaging they come in. Sustainable packaging, with its focus on reducing toxicity, can build trust and confidence among consumers.

Responsible sourcing

Responsible sourcing highlights the significance of selecting materials from suppliers who adhere to environmentally sound and ethical practices.



Environmental stewardship

Sustainable packaging begins with the materials used. Sourcing materials from suppliers committed to sustainable practices ensures that the production of those materials has a minimal impact on the environment. This includes responsible forest management, low-impact manufacturing processes, and reduced energy consumption.



Ethical labour practices

Responsible sourcing goes beyond environmental considerations and extends to labour ethics. It ensures that workers involved in the production of packaging materials are treated fairly, paid decent wages, and provided safe working conditions. This promotes social justice and fairness within the supply chain.



Transparency and traceability

Sustainable packaging efforts often require transparency and traceability in the supply chain. Responsible sourcing ensures that materials can be traced back to their source, which is critical for verifying their sustainability credentials and compliance with ethical standards.



Reduced environmental footprint

By sourcing materials from suppliers with sustainable practices, businesses can significantly reduce their environmental footprint. This includes lower carbon emissions, reduced resource depletion, and decreased waste generation.



Consumer expectations

Many consumers today are particular about the products they purchase, including the packaging they come in. Responsible sourcing aligns with consumer values and expectations for sustainable and ethical products.



Saying no to disposable coffee cups

Killarney's fight against waste and pollution

Popular County Kerry town, Killarney has emerged as a trailblazer in the fight against waste and pollution. As the first Irish town to ban single-use coffee cups, it has revolutionised the way people enjoy their coffee. This inventive 'bring or buy' reusable scheme has not only transformed the town's coffee culture but has also made a substantial positive impact on the environment.

Formerly plagued by disposable coffee cups that marred its streets and natural beauty, Killarney faced a significant problem. With a weekly consumption rate of 23,000 cups, equivalent to 18.5 tonnes of waste annually, the town decided to act. By introducing a clever system where café-goers must bring their own, or pay a €2 deposit for a reusable cup which is refunded

when the cup is returned. Killarney has witnessed dramatic changes. Overflowing bins are now a rarity, and discarded cups have become an uncommon sight. Inspired by its success, neighbouring towns are exploring similar initiatives, hoping to see this transformative idea ripple across Ireland and beyond.

Lisburn is transforming coffee culture

Lisburn is leading the way in addressing climate change through a practical community effort. The Lisburn Chamber of Commerce and SONAS (a new grocery, café and community space in Lisburn) are at the forefront of this initiative, with generous support from Keep Northern Ireland Beautiful through the Climate Challenge Fund. Their mission is straightforward: to create a closed-loop reusable cup system right in the heart of Lisburn City Centre. This project serves two important purposes; firstly, it aims to reduce the use of disposable cups and the resulting waste and litter, and secondly, it hopes to spark

essential conversations among café owners and customers about the environmental benefits of such a scheme.

This project also invites business owners in Lisburn to be pioneers in adopting this circular economy approach. It encourages people to visit the city centre café participating in the scheme, where they can enjoy their coffee while also reducing waste. As a pilot project driven by the local chamber of commerce, this endeavour has the potential to engage a wide range of people, raise awareness in the community, and inspire positive changes in behaviour. Lisburn is taking practical steps towards a more sustainable future.



Next steps...

There are many packaging solutions available on the market for business to investigate and consider.

Changing how goods are packaged will go a long way to slowing down climate change and the growth of environmentally destructive landfill sites.

To start your sustainable packaging journey, begin by asking yourself a few questions:

- Are you using excessive packaging?
- Can you downsize your packaging or use lighter packaging?
- Can you replace single-use packaging with returnable packaging?
- Can you eliminate problematic or unnecessary plastic packaging?
- Is your packaging biodegradable?

- Can people reuse your packaging?
- Is your packaging recyclable?
- Can you eliminate packaging altogether?

Do your research, work with suppliers to help meet sustainability targets whilst reducing costs. Don't be afraid to tell your customers what actions you're taking to protect the environment. Together we can reduce and eliminate waste.

Does your business want to do better with packaging? Don't know where to begin?
Please get in touch, we are here to help:

enquiries@keepnorthernirelandbeautiful.org

#TacklingPlasticNI #PlasticPromise



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