



## UCC Green Campus and KSG Launch Ireland's first Single-Use Plastic Free Café

In September 2018, UCC Green Campus Committee, in collaboration with KSG (the university's contracted food service provider) officially launched the Bio Green Café, Ireland's first single-use plastic free café. The move followed 2017's ban on disposable cups in the University's Boole Library building and KSG's agreement to offer discounts to staff and students using reusable cups. It coincided with the UCC Student Union obtaining funding from the Southern Region Waste Management Office to give a free reusable cup to all incoming first year students. The café was a major contributing factor to UCC being ranked number 1 University in the world for SDG 12: Sustainable Consumption and Production in the Times Higher Education Impact Ranking 2019.



### Innovation

The UCC Bio Green Café is a demonstration of the successful design and operation of a single-use plastic free café. It is a case study in how green procurement, stakeholder engagement and environmental awareness and education can contribute to bringing about a complete redesign in the provision of a service. Single-use plastic has been eliminated from all front- and back-of-house activities.

Front of house, water and other beverages are available in tin cans or glass bottles. There are three options for customers dining in the café:

- 1) Eat-in on ceramic tableware
- 2) Take away – bring your own lunchbox/cup/bottle
- 3) Take away – customers pay a surcharge for compostable cups/lunchboxes.

The compostable takeaway option is hidden from view, and therefore only available if customers specifically request it.

Back of house changes required a complete review of suppliers and engagement with current/new suppliers to either

- a) Provide stock in reusable containers or paper packaging
- b) If single-use plastic was a requirement for health and safety reasons, the supplier would deliver the item in plastic, remove the plastic onsite and take it away with them.

A complete redesign of the café infrastructure was also undertaken to ensure that the facilities supported the new service being provided. A custom segregated bin system was installed with clear labelling referring to the specific products on sale in that café. A weighing station was installed next to the bins, enabling staff to weigh the different types of waste being produced and monitor the success of the initiative. A combined cup-washing system and water-refilling station was installed so that customers could wash their own reusable mug and fill their own bottles.



### **Environmental Benefit**

In the first three months of operation, the Bio Green Café saw over 20,000 pieces of disposable items avoided. Waste tonnage has reduced by 95%. The scalability and replicability of this project means that the potential environmental benefit is enormous.

The café was always intended as a real-life experiment into how a catering service could be redesigned to eliminate single-use plastics. The parts of the redesign that are scalable, have now been scaled up across the university. For example, all University restaurants now give the option of

bringing your own lunchbox. Across campus, plastic bottles are being eliminated from catering at conferences and meetings. KSG have installed an Infinity Water System, which will enable glass bottle refills reducing the number of plastic bottles by 10,000 per year.

### **Social Benefit**

The “plastics crisis” together with climate breakdown, is one of the greatest environmental and social challenges of our time. On the week of the launch, staff and students organised a “Litter Pick” in conjunction with Clean Coasts at the Lee Fields in Cork City.



In terms of awareness and educational value, the café has enormous social benefit. Behaviour change to promote more environmentally friendly behaviour requires organisations to “engage, encourage, enable and exemplify” (Defra 2011). The Bio Green café engages customers through events and communications, encourages through making the more environmentally friendly choice the easier one, enables through the provision of adequate facilities and exemplifies in making a commitment and acting as a demonstration site for plastic-free catering services.

### **Economic Benefit**

The café has actually seen an increase in custom since its relaunch as the Bio Green Café. It has become a “destination” café within the campus, with staff and students specifically organising meetings there. The café launch was featured on Virgin Media news, and national newspapers including the Irish Independent and the Irish Examiner.

The launch of the café came after a year of targeted campaigns by the Green Campus committee in UCC to reduce the amount of single use plastic and improve the infrastructure across campus for recycling. It was felt therefore that by providing the necessary information and infrastructure for customers to “do the right thing”, the environment supported the implementation of penalties for “doing the wrong thing”. Therefore, the cost of takeaway compostable cups and salad containers was passed onto the customer and not borne by KSG or the University, as would often otherwise be the case.

Green Public Procurement is key to achieving a more circular economy and delivering on the government’s Climate Action Plan. As the [Green Public Sector Organisation of the Year](#) (2019), UCC is sharing its learnings with other PSOs and in particular HEIs.



## Commitment

The launch of the café is part of UCC's overall Green Campus initiative and commitment to become single-use plastic free by 2023. It reflects the University's overall Strategic Plan (2017-2022) which commits the University to "enhance UCC's sustainability reputation as Ireland's first 'Green University'" and UCC's Sustainability Strategy (2016) which specifically aims to "manage and reduce waste generation by the University community through behavioural and practice change".

In 2017, UCC's catering service contract was renewed, with sustainability featuring, for the first time, as part of the award criteria. Following the awarding of the contract to KSG, a Restaurant Committee was put together to monitor the implementation of the contract. The university's Sustainability Officer and Energy Manager were invited to sit on this committee, where ideas for potential "green" projects would be explored.

## Replication Potential

UCC Green Campus and KSG have hosted a number of visits to the café from other business and public sector organisations looking to replicate the approach taken here. In January 2019, the Minister of State for Higher Education Mary Mitchell O'Conner visited the café in the lead up to the development of the All of Government Plan on Climate Action.

UCC is building a strategic partnership with the University of Bologna on Green Campus activities and specifically our drive to be single-use plastic free. The initial activities are to be funded under an ERASMUS+ KA2 grant, which has just been awarded (July 2019). The UCC Green Campus programme has also been awarded funding from the International Sustainable Campus Network to travel to Colombia in October and undertake workshops with universities across three cities as part of their "mentorship programme". Building on the experiences of mentoring international campuses, the UCC Green Campus team are in the process of developing workshops that will be delivered to other HEIs, businesses and Public Sector Organisations in Ireland.