ATTITUDES & BEHAVIOURS TOWARDS REUSE IN THE UK

Annual Polling Survey

APRIL 2025

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INTRODUCTION

As part of our mission to make plastic pollution a thing of the past, City to Sea has been monitoring public attitudes and readiness to move away from single-use to reuse.

Reuse, refill and return behaviours have been around for centuries. However, in the UK, where this research is focused, the last 70 years have seen the single-use system dominating the market. There's a need for our communities to remember that previous generations were embedded in a low-waste lifestyle.

"Why don't we go back to what was used in 50's, 60's, 70's etc."

Survey respondent

Nowadays, although people care deeply about doing their part for the environment and the appetite for reuse system is stronger than ever, the uptake is taking time.

There's still some progress to do to make reuse, refill and return second nature.

We believe it is only by better understanding people's habits, beliefs and preconceptions that we can design and promote a better circular future.

Research method

We worked with market research team Obsurvant to carry out a survey targeting adult respondents in the UK, nationally representative of age, gender, and region.

Obsurvant is an accredited MRS company partner and a certified member of the British Polling Council.

Respondents were asked about their awareness and attitudes towards single-use plastics as well as their reusing, refilling and returning habits in their weekly shop.

This survey was taken in April 2025 by 2,004 respondents on both mobile and desktop devices and all were based in the UK.

The following report summarises the insights gathered through this polling, comparing them to our previous editions, with data going back to 2018.

SINGLE-USE PLASTICS

Where does the UK public stand?

1.Nearly 8 in 10 UK public are already taking action!

People care about reducing their use of single-use plastics, are already taking action and want to do more.

Indeed, almost 8 in 10 UK public are already taking action to reduce single-use plastics in their weekly shop. The 25-34 year old age group seem to be more likely to actively avoid single-use plastics (85%).

58% of people say they have tried new ways to reduce single-use packaging waste in the last 12 months, driven by the 25-34yo age group.

Making a difference drives behaviours

These new habits were prompted by environmental motivations, such as reducing single-use packaging usage (45%), understanding the difference they can make (38%), but also receiving information from watching the news (25%), campaigns (21%) and documentaries (22%) and just novelty effect (19%).

8 IN 10

are already taking action to reduce single-use plastics in their weekly shop.

58%

report to have tried new ways to reduce single-use packaging in the last 12 months, driven by the 25-34 age group.

PRIMARILY MOTIVATED

to reduce single-use packaging usage.

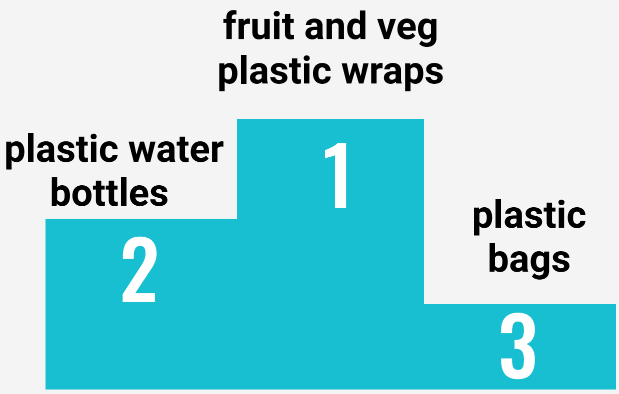
Source: Attitudes towards reuse in the UK, City to Sea, Obsurvant, April 2025

2. But people find it hard to avoid single-use plastics in our current market.

The single-use plastics that the public find the most difficult to avoid are:

- Plastic-wrapped fruit and vegetables (21%),
- water bottles (18%),
- plastic bags (14%),
- takeaway containers (9%)

As a result, plastic wrapped fruit and veg, water bottles and bags in single-use plastics are the top 3 items that the public would like to see being banned from shops across the UK.

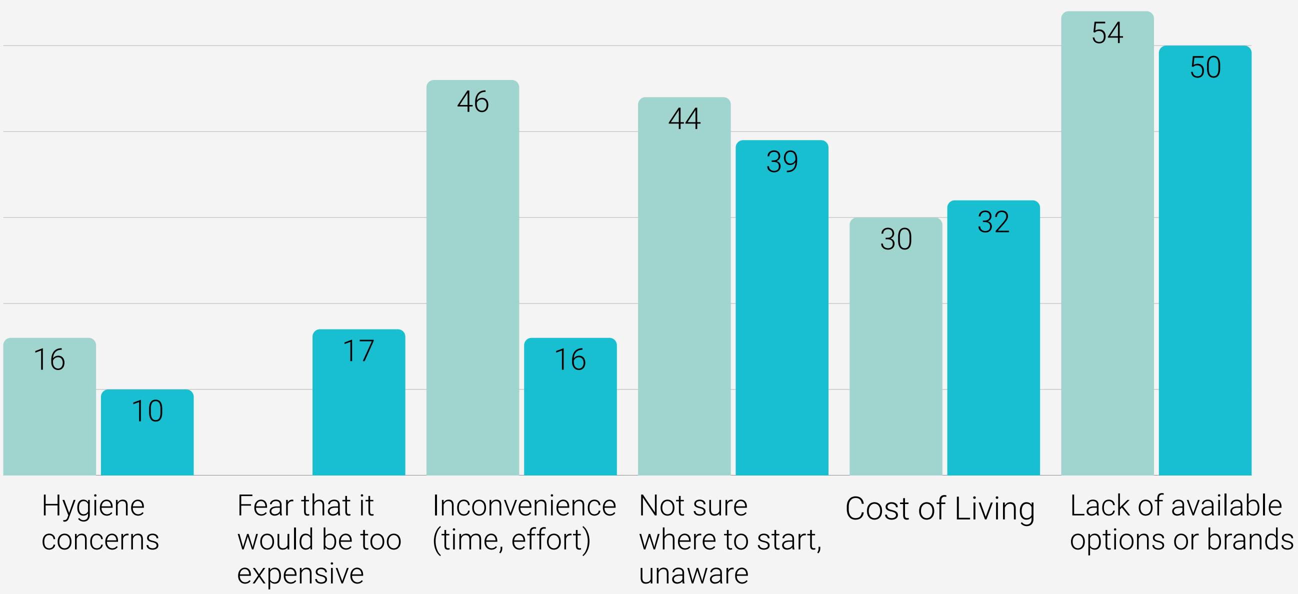


TOP 3 ITEMS

in single-use that people want to see being banned in the UK.

Lack of available options

has been consistently the main reason preventing the public from reducing their use of single-use plastics (67%). Either because they are unaware of them or because of a lack of options and brands where they shop.



Q: What's currently stopping you from doing more to reduce your use of single-use plastics?

2024 2025

Source: Attitudes towards reuse in the UK, City to Sea, Obsurvant, April 2025

3. There's a wide agreement that Government and big brands should do more.

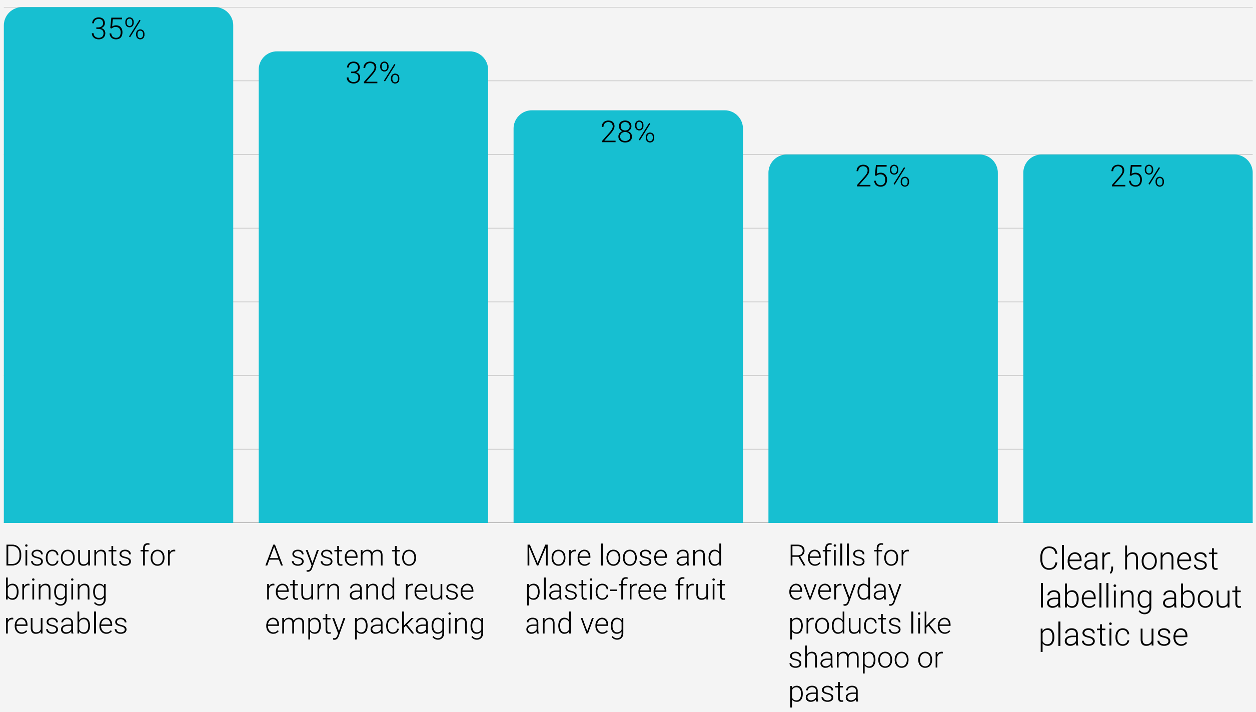
- 68% agree or strongly agree that it should be a government priority to tackle plastic pollution, and 78% agree there should be more campaigns from the Government to raise awareness around the consequences of plastic pollution and climate change.
- 3 in 4 of the UK public agrees brands and retailers should do more to provide reusable, refillable and returnable shopping options, and 65% agree they should educate more consumers around these initiatives.

3 IN 4

respondents agree brands and retailers should do more to provide reusable, refillable and returnable shopping options.

Offering reusable options not only meets demand and can support growth!

More than a quarter of the public reports they would be more likely to shop in a supermarket that provides the following



Q: Which of the following would make you most likely to support or shop with major supermarkets, if any?

Source: Attitudes towards reuse in the UK, City to Sea, Obsurvant, April 2025

LIVING IN A WORLD THAT REFILLS AND RETURNS

Where are we at?

1. Readiness to reuse, refill and return is high, but education is needed.

The results are clear: people are ready for change. 71% of respondents want to see more reusable, refillable and returnable options where they shop.

Whilst the public is largely in favour of action to reduce packaging waste and recognise there has been more efforts to explain how to reduce packaging waste (almost half of the public at 48%), more education and awareness seems to be needed.

A call for consistent messaging to understand the difference between recycle, refill, reuse.

Although 61% believe recycling isn't enough to tackle plastic pollution and waste, a third of the UK public reports they don't clearly understand the difference between recycling, reusing and refilling.

80% agree there should be greater clarity and consistency around what can be recycled or reused in the UK.

71%

want to see more reusable, refillable and returnable options where they shop.

> "The supermarket where I live doesn't stock refillable containers"
>
> **Survey respondent**

1 IN 3 BRITS

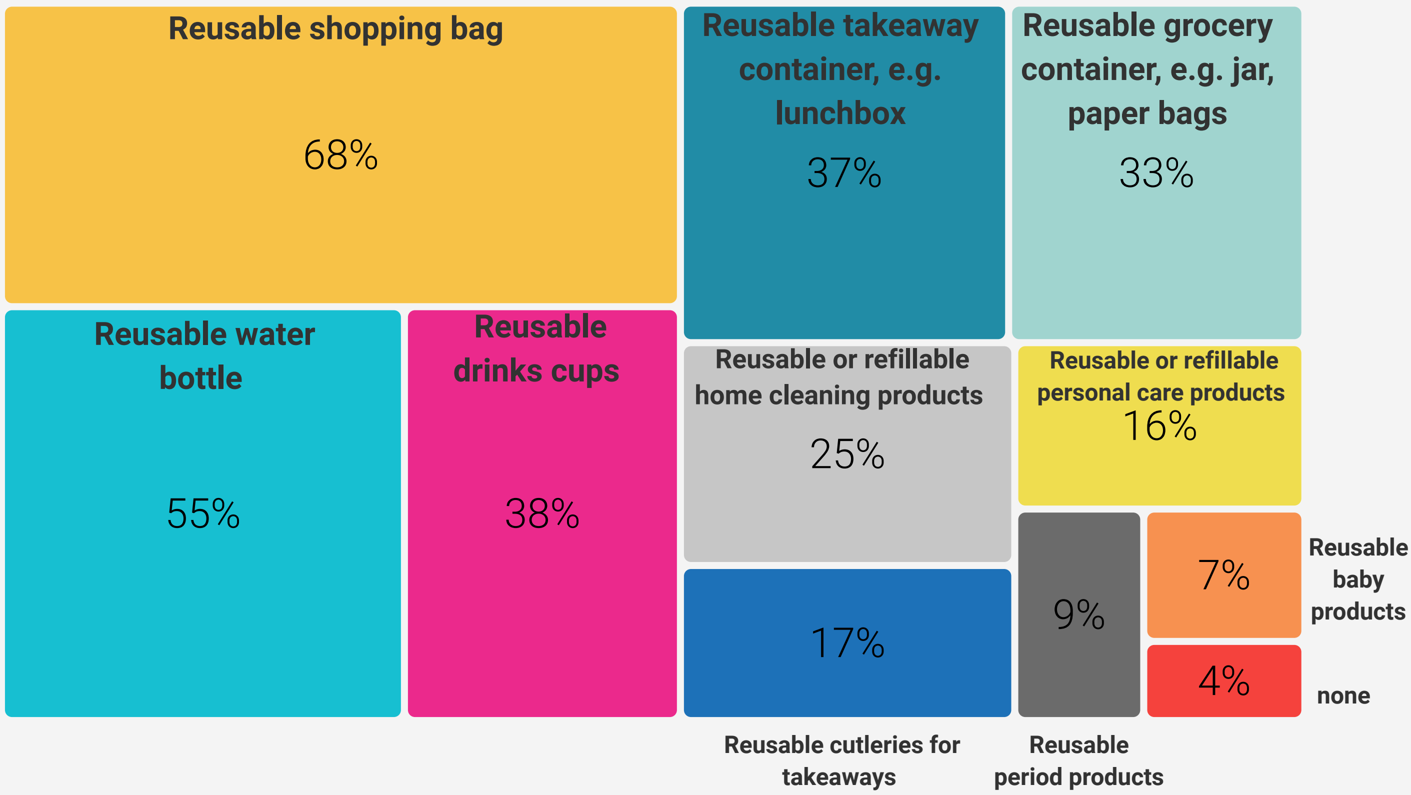
don't clearly understand the difference between recycling, reusing or refilling.

Source: Attitudes towards reuse in the UK, City to Sea, Obsurvant, April 2025

Current usage of reusable containers.

Using reusables is becoming part of people's lives in the UK. Most people say that they own and use reusable shopping bags (68%), reusable water bottles (55%), followed by reusable drink cups (38%) and reusable food takeaways containers (38%).

Women are consistently more likely to use refill and reuse options.
Younger generations (18-24 and 25-34 age groups) tend to use less of the most popular reusables, but they use more other types of reusables like period products, baby products and reusable cutlery.



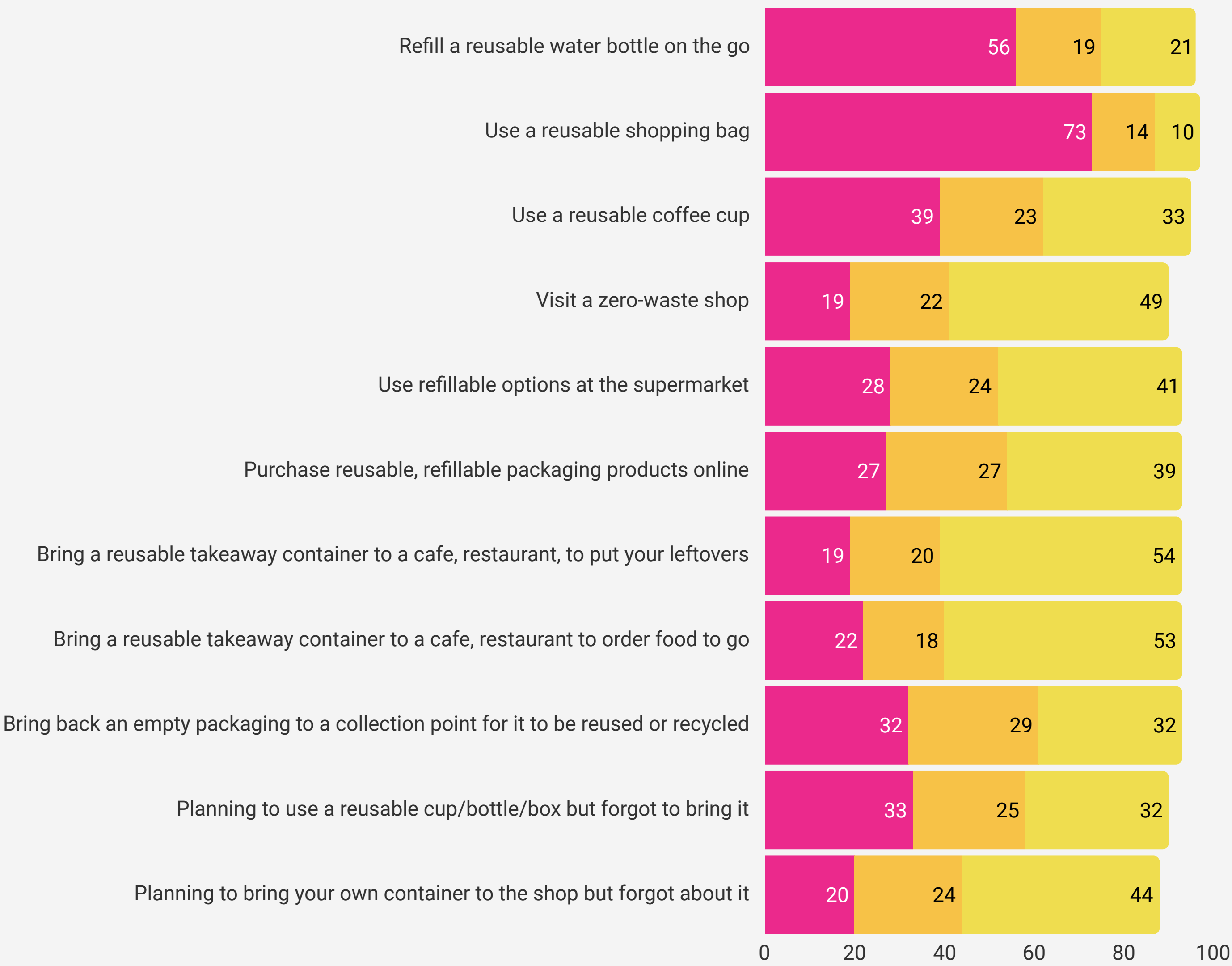
Q: Which of the following reusable, refillable options do you currently use, if any? (%)

Source: Attitudes towards reuse in the UK, City to Sea, Obsurvant, April 2025

2.Shopping patterns are shifting towards reuse, refill and return.

1 in 4 respondents say they are regularly purchasing in reusable, refillable or returnable packaging, whether that's reusable or refillable options at a supermarket (28%), purchasing them online (27%), or bringing back an item after use to be reused or recycled (32%).

The same goes for the hospitality sector, where 1 in 5 people declare they regularly bring their own containers to a café or restaurant for food to go.
Despite good intentions and usage, a third of respondents still say they often forget to carry their reusables on the go.



Q: How often do you do the following behaviours? (%)

- very often (most days + more than once a week)
- sometimes (once or twice a month, once or twice a year)
- rarely or never (less than once a year)

Source: Attitudes towards reuse in the UK, City to Sea, Obsurvant, April 2025

Big opportunities for the reuse economy

Provided there is availability, people reported they were likely or very likely to purchase in reusable, refillable or returnable packaging across many categories, including food cupboard (76%), fresh produce (72%) and homecare products (71%).

A clear location where people want to shop in reusables are supermarkets (78%), followed by independents and pharmacy stores (68%), and food markets and zero waste shops (67%).

Imagine options are available where you shop:How likely or unlikely would you be to pick the following products in reusable, refillable or returnable packaging?	2025
Food cupboard, e.g. pasta, rice, cereals and coffee	76%
Fresh & chilled, e.g. fruit & vegetables, eggs, milk	72%
Homecare products, e.g. laundry products, dishwasher cleaning products	71%
Bakery & pastry	70%
Drinks, e.g. juice, soft drinks and spirits	70%
Health & wellbeing, e.g. supplements	68%
Condiments, e.g. ketchup and mustard, spices	64%
Beauty & personal care products, e.g. body wash, shampoo, toothpaste, perfume	61%
Pet supplies	59%
Frozen, e.g. ice, ice-cream, desserts, fruit & vegetables, meat & poultry	58%
Baby & toddler, e.g. nappies, lotions, wipes	46%

Imagine options are available where you live:How likely or unlikely are you to try new products in reusable, refillable and returnable packaging in the following retailers?	2025
Supermarkets	78%
Independents, e.g. convenience stores, delicatessen, butchers	68%
Pharmacy stores	68%
Markets, e.g. farmers markets, street-food markets	67%
Zero waste stores	66%
Online retailers, e.g. online supermarket, marketplace	65%
Eat-in venue, e.g. coffee shops, restaurants, pubs, caterers, hotels	64%
Food to go, e.g. hot food to collect from a venue	64%
High-street retail, e.g. boutiques, department stores	63%
Websites, e.g. brand's website	61%
Home delivery, e.g. hot food delivered to your place	59%

Source: Attitudes towards reuse in the UK, City to Sea, Obsurvant, April 2025

Cost of living

Undeniably, the cost of living crisis is affecting all aspects of our economy, with no exception to the reuse landscape.

Concerns about affordability and the cost of living crisis are increasingly shaping consumer decisions, with 37% reporting they've stopped sustainable habits due to financial pressures.

This barrier is often driven by the perception that reusable options are more expensive, even if that's not always the case. About 40% believe reusables cost more than single-use, up 5 points from the previous year.

- Younger generations have different beliefs, as they expect it to have no difference on cost, or even save them money (29% of the 25-34yo).
- The same goes for those who have tried new sustainable habits in the last year, 26% of them expecting to save money, and 23% expecting no difference on cost.

37%

of respondents report that cost of living issues have prompted them to stop doing an initiative to reduce their use of single-use packaging.

"[I'm] struggling with state pension, so money is tight."

Survey respondent

The importance of communicating with value in mind

Providing a few initiatives/benefits with value in mind would help people form new habits for reusable:

- Being able to collect points or rewards every time they choose these products (21%)
- Knowing that the next purchase would be cheaper after they return the empty packaging (21%)
- Getting deals /incentives (20%)

Source: Attitudes towards reuse in the UK, City to Sea, Obsurvant, April 2025

Unlocking availability

Having greater access to available options where people live would be enough for 21% of respondents to form new habits in the future.

As reuse initiatives are gaining momentum, the public recognise that there needs to be a harmonious system in place:

- Being able to return the empty packaging to any location in the country (not just the one where they purchased from) would help 20% of public to take part.
- 17% agree that having multiple brands and businesses using the same system to reuse, refill and return packaging (e.g. instead of having one process per brand or supermarket) would help them form new habits in the future.

"[I could do more] if ALL SUPERMARKETS took part in refilling and accepting returnables!"

Survey respondent

More to be done to normalise behaviours

Although people want to see more options available and are ready to take action, depending on the situation they won't be always comfortable asking for reusable options:

- Only 36% feel comfortable or very comfortable asking for a reusable bottle to be refilled in a café, restaurant or pub when they have not made a purchase, that's -2 points vs 2024 and -8 points vs 2022.
- 27% of respondents would feel very uncomfortable or uncomfortable asking a café to be served takeaway food in their own containers.

Reuse is people-powered

25% of respondents report that the lack of support or encouragement from their peers and/or family has made them stop doing a sustainable initiative to reduce single-use plastic in the last 12months, this goes up to a third for the 25-34 year old group.
Making people feel like they are not the only one to care and to take action can drive impact, (in fact, 8 in 10 of the public is taking action!)

Source: Attitudes towards reuse in the UK, City to Sea, Obsurvant, April 2025

CONCLUSION

The UK public are ready, but need support to go further

The UK public shows a strong willingness to reduce their reliance on single-use plastics, with nearly eight in ten already taking action to minimise waste in their weekly shopping.

Public behaviour is driven by environmental motivations, awareness campaigns, and media coverage. It's encouraging to see that 58% of respondents have tried new ways to cut back on single-use packaging in the last 12 months.

Many people already own and use reusables like water bottles, drinks cups, and takeaway containers. However, they don't always feel comfortable asking for reusables to be accepted, especially in hospitality settings. These moments reveal a clear opportunity for stronger communication to make reuse second nature and legitimise these behaviours.

While motivation is high, availability remains the largest barrier to adopting reusable, refillable, and returnable packaging options. 67% of people say a lack of access or awareness of these alternatives prevents them from doing more. Cost of living concerns and financial pressures are undeniably shaping people's shopping decisions, including those regarding reuse products. Improving availability and awareness of reusable options where people already shop, and ensuring that communication efforts focus on benefits and value could be a key to long lasting impact.

The UK public is ready, and is taking action to reduce single-use plastic—but faces systemic barriers around availability, affordability, and awareness.

The key to accelerating the transition to a reuse economy lies in making it easy, affordable, and socially supported. With better infrastructure, clear messaging, and visible leadership from brands and government, reusable, refillable, and returnable packaging can become the new norm—and a big step forward for the environment.

WE'RE HERE TO HELP

Get in touch with our team at info@citytosea.org.uk if you have any questions about the report, or would like to collaborate on a research project.