

Scaling returnable packaging systems in M&S stores

Progress Report
April 2025



M&S
EST. 1884



Introduction

M&S have teamed up with Reposit and City to Sea to tackle single-use packaging waste, supporting M&S's Plan A commitment to reduce plastic packaging. The cross-sector partnership has been set up to demonstrate returnable packaging systems at scale and is supported by UK Research & Innovation's (UKRI) Smart Sustainable Plastic Packaging Fund.

Launched in 2022, phase 1 of the project saw the development of M&S's Refilled range, allowing people to choose from 8 pre-filled own-brand cleaning and laundry products in returnable packaging in 6 stores. Building on the initial success and popularity, M&S announced the expansion of the range in January 2024 to 25 stores, and increasing the product range to 10 products.

Offering people more sustainable choices and a convenient solution to tackle single-use plastic packaging, the programme has been popular with M&S customers since its launch. Rate of sales in some cases are on par with the single-use equivalent and return rates are continuing to grow month by month, with return rates going as high as 74% in selected stores.

The collaborative returnable platform has been designed to optimise operational and commercial efficiency, whilst assessments with lifecycle analysis partners have shown that significant environmental savings are achievable.

In-store colleagues have appreciated the ongoing improvement approach to make the system convenient for both the customers and operators.

As the consortium continues to grow and to work towards the next phase of development, the following report provides an update on progress and achievements to date.

Read on to learn more about this circular model, how the scheme is growing and the continuous improvements made along the way to drive lasting impact.

Let's return the world, together!

1 Background

What is returnable packaging?

Returnable packaging platforms enable consumers to buy a product that's pre-filled and return the packaging when it is empty after use. The empty packaging is then collected, professionally cleaned and refilled to be put back into use.

Such schemes aim to provide a convenient solution to reduce packaging waste at scale across various product categories, providing an alternative to single-use plastics.

Consumer demand is high

The intention is here with growing concern (83%¹ of UK people) around the plastic pollution in weekly shopping².

Unlocking availability: Returnable packaging represents a big opportunity in the UK. 69%³ of people declare they would be willing to buy in returnable packaging, but a lack of available options where people shop remains the biggest barrier to drive adoption.

A unique partnership between M&S and Reposit.

Supporting M&S' Plan A commitment to reducing plastic packaging, M&S joined forces with returnable packaging pioneers Reposit. Together, they launched M&S Refilled, a wide range of home cleaning products in returnable aluminium packaging.

Cleaning products alone account for 4.4% of the packaging impacts⁴ in an average UK supermarket.

The M&S Refilled range aims to reduce single-use packaging waste whilst ensuring ease and convenience for customers.

The same M&S quality product inside, in a returnable bottle!



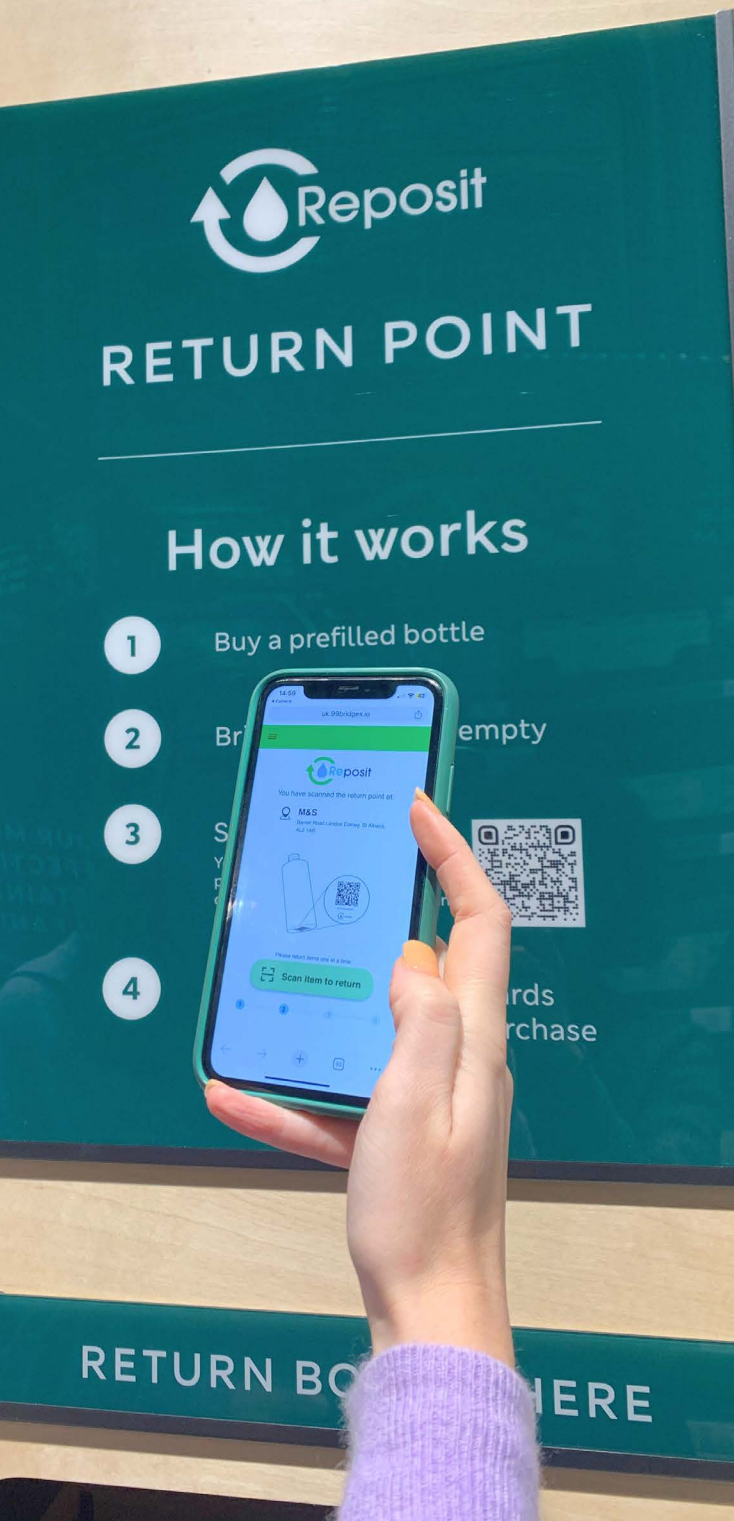
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1. Attitudes towards Refill and Reuse in the UK, City to Sea, Consumer Polling Obsurvant, March 2024

2. Plastic and plastic pollution routinely comes up as one of the top 2 ESG issues that M&S customers care about in quarterly surveys.

3. The Future of Prefill - City to Sea

4. The weighted single score is made up of the total impact of four environmental indicators (climate change, land use, water use, and virgin resource use).Packaging: Which supermarket categories have the biggest opportunity for action?



2 The Solution

How does it work in practice?

For M&S shoppers, the solution consists of 3 easy steps which incentivise them to return their empty packaging. Shop. Return. Save!



Shop: Consumers buy their favourite M&S home cleaning product in a returnable bottle and uses as normal. The price includes a one-time £2 bottle cost.



Return: Once it's empty, consumers return the empty bottle to their nearest stores.



Save: After scanning and dropping the empty bottle, consumers get £2 back as a voucher to spend at M&S.

How the operation works

Behind the scenes, M&S works with Reposit to ensure the packaging is safely collected, cleaned and reused.

- ▶ Bottles are asset-tracked using QR codes, allowing full traceability, enabling product compliance and accurate data on the number of reuses.
- ▶ All bottles are standardised and made from 100% recycled aluminium, for lower carbon footprint.
- ▶ Reposit manages the logistics infrastructure, maximising efficiencies by backhauling empty packaging in vehicles used to deliver consumables to store.
- ▶ Reposit's innovative technology is used to remove the labels and wash the bottles using just water and heat, eliminating the need for any additional chemistry.
- ▶ Voucher issuance is automated and administered via Reposit web app or vending machines.



A phased approach optimised for testing and learning

Over the last 2 years, the partnership co-developed an iterative “testing and learning” approach to get better understanding of consumer behaviours when it comes to buying and returning products in reusable packaging and support sustainable growth.

This resulted in 4 project milestones testing a wide range of metrics for on-going improvements: several types of self-service return points, reverse logistics infrastructure, in store merchandising and messaging framework.

The following pages detail the various interventions for each of the phases, highlighting learnings and improvements made along the way.

This supported sustainable growth and scale, and lead M&S to announce it's expanding the Refilled range to more stores nationwide in 2024⁵.

5. [M&S expands popular 'Refilled' scheme to 25 stores across the UK | Marks & Spencer](#)



Phase 1



Phase 2

Phase 1 - 2022

Implementation details

- ▶ Reverse vending machines as return points across all locations.
- ▶ Launched in 6 stores across the UK – (York, Bluewater, Aintree, London Colney, Stratford, Stevenage).
- ▶ Customers could return their empty packaging by scanning the bottle directly on the machine and received printed vouchers from the machine to use at the till.
- ▶ Refilled range included 8 M&S own-brand home cleaning and laundry products.

What the findings were

- ▶ Reverse vending machines can be prone to operational challenges: downtime linked to system errors or connectivity issues, requiring additional colleague assistance and training.
- ▶ Reverse vending machines require additional floor space in the store, which can be challenging for smaller stores.
- ▶ Reverse vending machines can be costly to implement without scale.

Key learnings for the next iteration of the system

- ▶ Reverse vending machines are currently unfamiliar and therefore can be hard to understand, operate and maintain, therefore identified as a bottleneck to project scalability.
- ▶ Agreed to develop a QR code-based returns process without hardware to reduce operation frictions and be more adaptable for stores.

Phase 2 - Sept 2023

Implementation details

- ▶ M&S London Colney tested a new QR code-based returns process with low-tech return point.
- ▶ After use, customers scan the QR code on the return point and the base of the bottle to return empty packaging via the ReBottle web app.
- ▶ Internet/mobile network access needed to allow customers to access the web app.
- ▶ Customers receive an email with the voucher to be used at the till.

What the findings were

- ▶ Colleagues and customers preferred the QR code-based returns process due to ease of access and user experience.
- ▶ Internet speed or network signal in the homecare aisle can be a challenge at London Colney store for customers to complete the return process.
- ▶ QR code return points are cheaper than the reverse vending machines although they take up the same amount of space in store.

Key learnings for the next iteration of the system

- ▶ Low tech return points were identified as the way to go in terms of scaling the project.
- ▶ M&S joined the UKRI project as a grant partner and committed to scaling to 25 stores by 2025.
- ▶ Decision to conduct mix of consumer research methodology by City to Sea to appreciate perceptions and motivations around the new return process.



Phase 3



Phase 4

Phase 3 - Jan 2024

Implementation details

- Announcement of the expansion to 19 new stores launched across the UK using low-tech return points.
- Product range extended from 8 to 10 home cleaning and laundry products, aligned with the equivalent reference in single-use packaging.
- Newly designed flat base aluminium bottles to allow for asset tracking on the base of the bottles.
- New label artwork with enhanced return messaging to encourage and incentivise people to return their packaging after use.
- Reverse logistics process was optimised by using an existing delivery provider to pick up empty bottles whilst making deliveries.

What the findings were

- Low-tech return points were successful from a cost and interface perspective, but the space issue remained unresolved.
- Return points in-aisle, placed next to their single-use equivalents performed better than those that were located in different parts of the store.
- New reverse logistics process led to cost savings and streamlined the process for store colleagues as they were dealing with a single, existing supplier.
- Flat base bottles with asset tracking on the base minimised customer and colleague confusion. These bottles were also more stable on the filling and washing lines.

Key learnings for the next iteration of the system

- Opportunity to develop an on-shelf low-tech return point that would be adaptable while taking up less space and test it in 1 store.
- Looking to A/B test messaging for return instructions via icons and simpler step-by-step to support return rates.

Phase 4 - Oct 2024

Implementation details

- On-shelf low tech return point launched in Bluewater store in Kent as a new test and learn iteration.
- On shelf return points are made out of recycled material creating customer messaging around circularity.
- Easy to install and can be placed on existing shelves by store staff without any specialist installation.
- This allows returnable to be merchandised directly in aisle alongside single-use alternatives.
- New messaging and icons created based on customer research.

What the findings were

- Colleague and customer's initial response to the unit is promising. 94% of M&S shoppers agree the information on the sign is clear (+8points vs previous iteration).
- It brings the Refilled proposition in aisle next to the single-use equivalent product, maximising its exposure within the cleaning products category.
- Data on sales and returns to be monitored to gauge success.

Key learnings for the next iteration of the system

- On-shelf return points rolled out to 3 new stores in January 2025, bringing the total live stores to 25.
- Decision to replace older low-tech return units with the on-shelf return points in all existing stores.

3 The Impact

Customer acceptance

Consumer behaviour and engagement play a critical role in the programme. **Since launch, more than 18,800 customers engaged with the M&S Refilled range**, showing that people are ready and actively seeking to reduce single-use plastic when they shop.

Consumer research conducted by City to Sea⁶ with 2,000 UK respondents, shows that people are embracing returnable products, showing positive acceptance with the overall concept, the material choice of the packaging and the Reposit return system in place.

72%

of respondents feel positive or very positive about standardised packaging in supermarkets.

86%

of respondents say they would prefer buying in reusable packaging, given a choice.

89%

like the material of aluminium reusable packaging, which is perceived as “premium” and “modern”, “looks fantastic”.

Key purchase drivers included **people’s trust in M&S brand and products**.

People valued the £2 off voucher valid towards their next purchase, as it incentivises them to return their empty bottles after use.

Commercial and environmental impact

The Reposit packaging used for the M&S products is made from 100% post-consumer recycled material (PCR). To better understand the environmental aspects of the programme, Reposit and M&S worked with the Reposit Carbon Model and Carbon Bright to conduct a lifecycle analysis (LCA).

The LCA provided invaluable insights for future improvements, showing that items need to be reused on average 4 times for laundry products and on average twice for surface cleaners and washing up liquid for the carbon emissions to be lower than a plastic bottle equivalent of the same size (based on calculations for aluminium containers in 500ml and 750ml).

Up to
74%
return rate
in selected
stores

The return rates continue to grow, indicating increasing engagement towards the programme, with **return rates going as high as 74% in selected stores**.

“

We’re delighted to see good results of our partnership with M&S coming through, demonstrating that return systems can work in retail for the benefit of people and planet. The involvement of M&S team on the ground and in the project has been instrumental to deliver such positive results, we’re proud to work alongside M&S to make this game-changing system a reality and support more people in finding sustainable and reusable shopping options where they live.

Stuart Chidley, Founder of Reposit



Customer quotes

“

Looks nice and eco-friendly.

“

The voucher is what convinced me to buy and buy again.

“

It’s, you know, good from an environmental point of view, but also from a cost point of view going forward.

6. Scaling Returnable Packaging - Key Insights - City to Sea



Next steps



Almost a year after expanding our Refilled Homecare range to more stores nationwide, we are pleased with the initial progress and have received some good feedback from customers, with engagement and return rates exceeding our expectations. We continue to work with our store colleagues to refine our takeback units and drive continuous improvement to make the system convenient for the community and viable operationally. We're optimistic about the potential for refilled systems of this nature to help us reduce packaging and carbon.

Lucinda Langton, Head of Sustainability, M&S Food

Looking to the future, the partnership will continue its iterative approach of testing and learning to deepen the understanding of consumer behaviour among M&S shoppers and support growth. Key next steps will include:

- ▶ Gaining deeper insights into shopper perceptions and behaviours regarding the new 'on-shelf return point.'
- ▶ Targeted intervention tests at a granular level by store, analysing their impact in terms of uptakes and returns..
- ▶ Undertaking research around returning behaviours with users of the programme.
- ▶ Testing new reward incentives such as money off vouchers valid toward any M&S shopping.
- ▶ Introducing mono-material closures for the products to reduce carbon impact and to allow for ease of recycling of closures.

This initiative is supported by the UKRI Innovate UK Smart Sustainable Plastic Packaging (SSPP) challenge, in collaboration with Reposit and City to Sea.



Want to see the M&S Refilled range in person?

Come visit one of M&S participating stores!

Refilled scheme is currently live in the following M&S stores by alphabetical order in Aintree, Bluewater, Camberley, Cheshunt, Cribbs Causeway, Falkirk Central Rp, Handforth, Hedge End, Hempstead Valley, Kingsley Village, London Colney, Leamington, Liverpool One, Meadowhall, Moseley Foodhall, Oatlands Harrogate, Purley Way, Silverlink Newcastle, Stevenage, Stockport, Tolworth, Vangarde, White City, Wolstanton Stoke and York.



Reposit created by Beauty Kitchen which is one of the world's highest-scoring B Corporations, are pioneering a returnable packaging platform that works for all stakeholders to accelerate the transition to reuse. They remove the barriers that brands, retailers and industry partners face switching to reuse by using asset-tracked, standardised, packaging-as-service system.



City to Sea is a not-for-profit organisation, on a mission to prevent plastic pollution at source. Their award-winning campaigns are tackling the single-use plastic items most found on our beaches and in our rivers and oceans by providing practical solutions and championing reuse over single-use. They bring about systems and behaviour change by designing, developing and promoting the transition away from single-use materials.

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M&S has committed to remove plastic from its food packaging and has already removed over 500m units from across its food business. The retailer recently reset its Plan A sustainability roadmap, with a singular focus on becoming a fully net zero business across its products and supply chain by 2040.



The Innovate Smart Sustainable Plastic Packaging Challenge (SSPP) is contributing to the UK's drive for clean growth and industrial decarbonisation by funding ground-breaking research and innovation to make plastic packaging fit for a sustainable future.

With a portfolio of over 70 funded projects, the SSPP challenge is the largest and most ambitious UK government investment to date in sustainable plastics research and innovation, driving cleaner growth across the UK's plastics, packaging and retail supply chains.