



Plastic Free Family

Liz Lowe and her family find out just how easy it is to reduce their environmental impact by going a week without plastic

The candles have been blown out, the bouncy castle is deflating and the children are finally weary. Long after cake crumbs have been swept away, memories of three generations celebrating will remain. But after hugs and goodbyes, it'll be more than just memories that are left behind.

A sea of plastic cutlery, plastic-coated drinks cups and plates, straws and food wrappers is swallowed up by black bags, headed for the rubbish dump... or worse. The plastic tide spills outside as children carry off party bags destined for the landfill.

When I unpack our grocery delivery the following morning to find a carrier bag containing a solitary shrink-wrapped cucumber,

“By 2050 the ocean will contain more tonnes of plastic than fish”

I wonder how it is we've reached this point.

“Plastic pollution is one of the greatest threats to our oceans,” says Tisha Brown, Oceans Campaigner with Greenpeace UK. “A rubbish truck's worth of plastic is dumped into the ocean every single minute.”

Research by the Ellen MacArthur Foundation estimates over 150 million tonnes of plastics lie in the ocean today. Plastic packaging accounts for 26% of the volume produced: most is used just once. If production increases as predicted, by 2050 the ocean will contain more tonnes of plastic than fish.

A plastic water bottle takes around 450 years to break down, but it doesn't disappear. It slowly disintegrates into ever-smaller bits of plastic. This stuff will outlive us, our children, our grandchildren and generations beyond.

The challenge

As a family with two young children, Isla, aged four, and Charlie, nearly

two, life veers between busy and frantic. But wanting to do our bit, I decided to see if we could avoid buying single-use plastic for one whole week.

While the ultimate aim is to reduce our plastic footprint long-term, whatever we do must be practical and affordable: we need solutions that don't cost the earth, in any sense.

So, armed with re-usable water bottles, a bamboo coffee cup, canvas totes and a set of cutlery, I feel daunted but decide to take the plunge. It's a week – how hard can it be?

FRIDAY

As the last of the milk hits the porridge pan, I frantically Google 'glass bottle milk delivery' and contact Moo2Me (moo2.me). All our cereal is bagged in plastic and I wonder how long before the kids get bored of porridge. About five minutes, it turns out, as my son pushes the bowl away.

“We'll make our own bread,” I announce to my two bemused children. Unwrapped loaves and rolls are usually more expensive, and we do use a lot of bread.

Could you go Waste Free?

Wiltshire Wildlife Trust ran a Waste Free February challenge and its website is full of brilliant tips. "We're encouraging people to set their own goals," explains Gemma Annan, Education Officer on the Recycle for Wiltshire Project. "Keep your challenge realistic – aim to produce no more waste than will fit into a plastic bag, or take on the challenge for a single day. If it can't be recycled, composted or reused, then avoid it and find alternatives, otherwise put it in your jar, bag or box."

www.wiltshirewildlife.org/waste-free-february

We weigh flour, and measure oil and water.

"Mix mix!" squawks Charlie, shoving flour in his ear. We leave the dough to prove, and I'll worry about scraping the debris from the floor later.

Our Riverford delivery arrives. Fruit and vegetables are mostly loose or paper-bagged, with just salad leaves in plastic (which Riverford will collect and recycle where possible). Vicki Mowat who,

"I'm already beginning to appreciate the plastics problem is not a simple one"

with her husband Alan, makes up Riverford's Bath veg team, explains: "It's never simple when it comes to packaging material choices. For example, paper and card often has a higher carbon footprint than plastic; however, this doesn't take into account plastic pollution in the ocean, for example."

I'm already beginning to appreciate the plastics problem is not a simple one.

In our local shop, I panic, as I realise almost everything we buy features plastic. We buy eggs for lunch and take a cake from the café to share at soft-play. Thankfully, this is enough to distract Isla from the "magic fridge" (AKA the vending machine).

By 4pm we have breadsticks, rolls and a loaf which we keep fresh

in a BeeBee beeswax wrap. It has required planning, but little actual baking time. By 4.15pm half the breadsticks are gone, and I realise we have no dinner. We head to the weekly pizza van... for more bread.

● SATURDAY ●

Off to Hartley Farm for lunch. I'm pleased to see the café uses compostable take-away cups and offer a discount to customers who bring their own. Chatting to Sally across the counter as I buy some paper-wrapped ham, I learn that the farm is switching to compostable deli pots, smoothie cups and straws (only to be given on request). As well as loose fruit and veg, I find individual frozen pastries and loose frozen peas. I could use my own container for raw meat too.



Hartley Farm is also a member of the Refill (www.refill.org.uk) scheme, which aims to reduce the number of plastic bottles purchased. The Refill app helps users find local sites where they can refill water bottles for free. A great idea, given that The Guardian reported last year that a million plastic bottles are bought per minute worldwide.



I'm still struggling with shopping and meal planning, but have found a great source of advice. George Tomlinson cut as much single-use plastic as possible from her family's life, before launching a website to help others do the same. George's theenvironmentalshoppingnetwork.com lists plastic-free products by category and location: on it I discover Who Gives a Crap loo rolls, glass-packaged Truthpaste and biodegradable dental floss.

"Don't expect to change overnight," says George. "Take baby steps, otherwise it's too overwhelming and you'll probably give up. Plan what you want to eat, make time to go and get what you need, and be sure to have bags and pots to put things in."

I plan to plan more.

● SUNDAY ●

Shopping with a kleptomaniac toddler and pestering pre-schooler is not high on my 'fun list'. But luckily my mother-in-law volunteers to watch the children while I undertake a supermarket sweep of Sainsbury's, Tesco, Asda, M&S, Lidl, Aldi and Co-op.

All of the stores have some unwrapped fruit and veg, though none organic, but the selection is limited and inconsistent. I'm amazed to find shrink-wrapped

swedes in some stores: nature has already packaged these hardy winter vegetables pretty well.

Fellow shoppers are amused as I shake cereal boxes, hunting for hidden plastic, before buying more Scotch Porridge Oats. In Sainsbury's I pick four loose cans of baked beans at greater cost, to avoid the bulk-buy plastic wrapping, while wondering why the discount can't be applied at check-out, as with other multi-buy deals?



In Lidl I see unwrapped loaves, but elsewhere bread barely makes it out of the oven before it's bagged. Grains and pasta are all in plastic, or at least have a plastic window. Even deli cheeses are mostly pre-wrapped. In Sainsbury's and Tesco I take my own container to the fish counters to avoid using a plastic bag. The fishmongers are surprised, but happily oblige.

Yoghurt is one of the only proteins our picky toddler will eat. Glass-packaged yoghurt is difficult to find and, at four times the cost of our usual brand, pricey for a toddler face mask. I feel like a failure as I buy a plastic carton.



By the end of the morning I'm tired and saddened. I'm also starving, but can't stomach a packaged sandwich or salad. Not for the first time this week, I am extremely grateful wine comes neatly packaged in glass.

I didn't know I could recycle that!

It's worth checking council websites as some surprising things can be collected or taken to a household recycling centre. Did you know B&NES residents can put broken electric toys out with recycling, as long as they're small enough to fit inside a carrier bag? Hairdryers, mobile phones and chargers, and clothes are among other items that can be collected.

Precious Pouches (you can find them on Facebook) collect biscuit wrappers and food pouches and recycle them, donating profits to RUH's Neonatal Intensive Care Unit. Drop-off points are located in Weston Village's Tesco Express and Children's Centre, Sainsbury's Odd Down, Tesco Paulton and Kids Kit, Midsomer Norton.

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When I discover A Plastic Planet's (aplasticplanet.com) campaign for a plastic-free aisle (now supported by Theresa May), I'm right behind them. I ask Ocado whether a 'virtual plastic-free aisle' might be an option. They respond to say they're "looking into the possibility, but don't yet have a solution". Despite my dejection, I sympathise with retailers and producers. Plastic is hygienic, cost-effective, lightweight and reduces food waste. No wonder it's everywhere.

MONDAY

In between swimming lessons, we head to the café. Bracing myself, I tell Isla we're trying not to buy

straws because they get stuck inside turtles' noses and make them ill. "OK," says Isla. I'm amazed.

Greenpeace's Tisha Brown elaborates. "Plastic becomes a hazard for wildlife. They can become entangled in it, they can choke on it, larger plastics break down into smaller pieces called microplastics, which animals mistake for food and end up eating."

Microplastics also include microbeads from toiletries and microfibres from synthetic fabrics, released during laundering. Plastics already contain a complex mix of chemicals, but Julian Kirby, Campaigner for Friends of the Earth, tells me microplastics can attract additional toxins, such as agricultural pesticides and industrial chemicals. Research into the implications of plastic entering the food chain, and ultimately landing on our plates, is still in its infancy, but last year, University of Ghent researchers claimed seafood eaters could ingest up to 11,000 tiny microplastic particles a year.



As we share a flapjack I catch Isla telling a neighbouring table they shouldn't be eating things out of plastic. This one might require further discussion.

TUESDAY

It's recycling day. I think we're fairly good recyclers, but am sometimes guilty of chucking it in and hoping for the best, so I check the Bath and North East Somerset website for exactly what can be collected. I realise I've made mistakes, such as not fully removing non-recyclable film from plastic meat trays.

Wiltshire's Lead Waste Technical Officer, Amy Williams, explains why

recycling correctly is important. "If people put the wrong materials in their recycling bin, these need to be separated out; this sorting process is costly."

High labour costs in this country make it more profitable for re-processors to ship recycling overseas, rather than cleaning and sorting it here. "The system currently incentivises exporting poor quality recycling," says Julian Kirby. Exported recycling counts towards our EU targets, regardless of whether it's actually recycled at the other end.



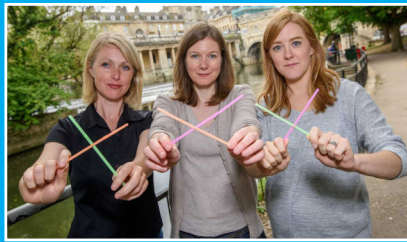
China, our biggest market for recycled plastics, has had enough of poor quality recycling containing dirty or non-recyclable plastics. As they close their doors, the UK needs to find solutions quickly.

Recycling isn't the solution to plastic pollution though, says Julian. "We need to actually reduce how much plastic is being produced at source."

According to The Ellen MacArthur Foundation, 'an overwhelming 72% of plastic packaging is not recovered at all: 40% is landfilled, and 32% leaks out of the collection system'. Globally, just 14% of plastic packaging is currently recycled and, unlike glass, plastic can generally only be recycled once, into a lower quality product. I'm finally beginning to understand how so much of this stuff ends up in the ocean.

Julian believes that "we should be thinking about plastic as being a pollution problem and the people who make and market it as being polluters, with the responsibility therefore on them to eradicate that pollution, whether that's through

The last straw



Bath-based environmental group, Families for a Bright Future, launched The Last Straw campaign after noticing they were "given drinks with plastic straws that we didn't ask for – and certainly didn't need". Co-founder Anna Knollys explains that "saying no to a straw is an easy way to start reducing our plastic waste. And the response has been really positive, especially from smaller chains and independents". www.thelaststrawbath.wordpress.com

designing alternatives or properly paying for the system to collect it."

That afternoon we re-use some un-recyclable things; making mobiles from coat hangers and mixing paint in chocolate box trays. We've prolonged their active lifespans at least.

WEDNESDAY



Charlie and I hit Bath's shops, with Wiltshire Wildlife Trust's brilliant Waste Free Challenge Guide.

"We're trying to go completely naked," announce staff in Lush. I feel awkward, and quite

"Plan what you want to eat, make time to go and get what you need and be sure to have bags and pots to put things in"

overdressed, until they explain the company's ambitions to phase out as much packaging as possible. I leave with bars of solid shampoo (£6.50 but apparently good for 100 washes), conditioner and soap. Beyond their beautiful fragrance they leave no trace, and I resolve to go naked as often as I can.

In Harvest, I can fill my own containers with grains, cereals, pulses, herbs and spices. Later, after a tip from Gemma



Annan at Wiltshire Wildlife Trust, I discover Onya bags and Collapse-it storage containers, which are far easier to cart around. In Holland & Barrett we buy healthy pick-and-mix with nuts, seeds and dried fruit.

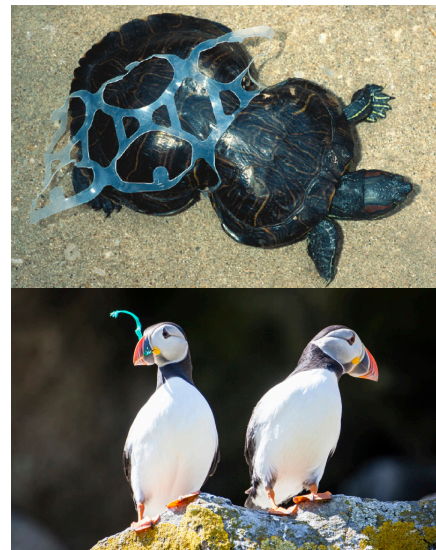
Heading home, we're caught in a hail storm with a buggy full of plastic-free shopping. We get home, with slightly soggy nuts, but yet again I haven't purchased a complete meal. Outside the village shop, a friend says Birdseye fish fingers are packaged in cardboard. At least the children eat them from our new Bobo&Boo biodegradable bamboo plates.

I'm whizzing up nuts and dried fruit into snack balls when my husband asks why I've stopped

buying his usual lunch meal pots. I explain my plan for delicious leftovers and a freezer brimming with home-cooked meals. Looking at the children's half-eaten fish fingers, he seems a little unconvinced. Finding time to make snacks, bread and family meals is proving challenging, but I hope batch cooking and better planning will help.

free, but at least I can minimise the recycling. Christine has been focusing on packaging recently, and aims to be 80% plastic-free within two years. Later, in Trowbridge, we discover S K Fruits where we stock up on loose produce at bargain prices. During a coffee break, our first re-usable nappy change goes well. I might not manage it every day, but each nappy avoided is one less in landfill.

I celebrate the end of our (almost) plastic-free week with a gin and glass-bottled tonic. We've come a long way, but have a lot



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further to go. And I am more aware of our overall consumption. Nothing simply goes away; be it into the bin, recycling box, down the drain or the loo. It all requires energy and resources to be dealt with. G&T in hand, I sign every petition against plastics pollution I can find: armchair activism, but it's a start.

I won't always have time to shop as I did this week – few parents would. And while plastic-free options are largely confined to independent traders and health shops, the mainstream shopper is unlikely to find them. But the necessary large scale change is beginning. Iceland has announced plans to remove plastic packaging from own-brand products by 2023, and Co-op has pledged to make all of its own-brand packaging recyclable, aiming for 80% by 2020. Hopefully more big brands will follow.

The aftermath

The following week is Isla's fourth birthday. Sadly, we are still far from perfect and I don't manage an entirely plastic-free party. It's an improvement though: no disposable plates or cups, and books instead of plastic-filled party bags (sorry kids).

As I stand with her grandmother, I wonder what the world will look like when Isla stands where we do. I don't know how many of my grandchildren's birthday parties I'll attend; I'll be thankful for any. But I'm determined to stand with them now, and do what I can to protect the world they will inherit. ■

Fix it or switch it



Can you fix it? Bath Repair Café runs twice monthly, with an upcoming event on 17 March at The Oriel Hall, Larkhall, Bath. The organisation also runs sessions on bike maintenance, and how to use a sewing machine.

www.facebook.com/RepairCafeBath

Get swishing. At a swish party everyone donates pre-loved clothes in exchange for tokens to buy others' items. It's a fun event involving free shopping! www.getswishing.com

Give and take. Unwanted items, in good condition, can be exchanged at Transcoco's free Community Swap Shop on 10 March, Selwyn Hall, Box. www.facebook.com/transcoco

THURSDAY

Embarrassingly there is one area I've avoided all week: my son's bottom. According to Wiltshire Real Nappy Network, around eight million nappies are thrown away daily in the UK, and the average child uses between four and six thousand nappies. For a small person, Charlie's plastic footprint (bumprint?) is shocking.

"The average child uses between four and six thousand nappies"

Wiltshire Real Nappy Network gives Wiltshire parents the opportunity to trial cloth nappies for free, B&NES council sells discounted ones and there are several cloth nappy libraries locally. I put on a brave face, and we venture to Bradford-on-Avon for our first cloth nappy outing.

At Christine's Sustainable Supermarket, I'm able to refill toiletries, cleaning products and laundry detergent. Liquid laundry and washing-up detergents have proved impossible to buy plastic-