IISD Experimental Lakes Area

BRIEFING NOTE

Reducing Single-Use Foodware

Perspectives on change from restaurants and customers in Winnipeg, MB

Desiree Langenfeld
Chelsea Rochman
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1. Introduction

To achieve the goal of zero plastic waste by 2030, the Canadian government has banned some single-use plastic items in its Single-use Plastics Prohibition Regulations. As more Canadians seek opportunities to further reduce single-use plastic waste, we aim to identify how to support businesses and customers for success.

In this brief, we focus on the single-use foodware used in restaurants and coffee shops. Restaurants and coffee shops provide single-use cups, containers, cutlery, straws, and other accessories, particularly for takeout. These materials are costly and generate a lot of waste. Approximately 73,000 tonnes of plastic leaks into the environment each year in Canada (Statistics Canada, 2026). The Science Assessment of Plastic Pollution found that single-use plastics made up the bulk of plastic found on Canadian shorelines (Environment and Climate Change Canada, 2020). Additionally, cleanup data from across Canada includes many foodware items in the "Dirty Dozen"—the top 12 items found in shoreline cleanups (Ocean Wise, 2025). Bottles and bottle caps, plastic bags, coffee cups, and straws are included in this list.

Since the 2022 federal single-use plastic ban, cleanup data has shown a 32% decrease in straws, 10% decrease in utensils, and 25% decrease in plastic bags found during shoreline cleanups (Ocean Wise, 2025). These numbers indicate that the federal regulations are working. Provinces that implemented plastic bans prior to the federal single-use plastic ban, like Prince Edward Island (2019), Nova Scotia (2020), and Newfoundland (2020), have seen even greater reductions in plastic items found on shorelines, which should encourage other provinces to adapt regulations beyond the federal ones (Ocean Wise, 2025).

To help businesses in Winnipeg, Manitoba, reduce waste (and save money), we aim to identify barriers and opportunities for reusable foodware programming in the city. Winnipeg is the capital city of Manitoba and sits at the confluence of the Red and Assiniboine rivers. Winnipeg hosts diverse neighbourhoods and a vibrant culinary scene with over 1,100 restaurants (Winnipeg Economic Development and Tourism, 2026). There is currently no city-wide reusable foodware programming in Winnipeg. Our aim is to change that by normalizing a reduction in single-use foodware and increasing the use of reusable foodware across the city.

This City of Winnipeg initiative was informed by a project led by the U of T Trash Team and Toronto Environmental Alliance in Toronto, Ontario (U of T Trash Team, n.d.-a). In their project, the U of T Trash Team assessed the willingness of customers and businesses to transition away from single-use foodware and ran a pilot project with various interventions to reduce its use, including Bring Your Own (BYO) and offering reusable and returnable foodware for takeout. They found that implementing reusable practices was feasible and beneficial, but that changing customer behaviour is difficult and requires targeted outreach. This work helped inform local strategies in the City of Toronto relevant to its Single-Use & Takeaway Items Reduction Strategy.[1]

Today, we aim to expand this work to Winnipeg to ultimately inform ways to reduce single-use foodware locally. Phase 1 of this project surveyed Winnipeg restaurants and cafés, as well as customers, to understand their perspectives and willingness to change. Phase 2 will pilot a program with local cafés and restaurants to increase BYO and implement a reusable foodware program for takeout. This report summarizes the key findings from Phase 1, where we surveyed customers and food-service businesses about the challenges and opportunities for reducing single-use foodware in Winnipeg. This research was conducted through a partnership between the International Institute for Sustainable Development Experimental Lakes Area (IISD-ELA) and the U of T Trash Team; it was funded by Environment and Climate Change Canada.

As part of our research at IISD-ELA, we test hypotheses about what happens to plastics when they enter ecosystems and how they affect wildlife.[2] Our work informs the urgency to reduce emissions from plastic pollution. This reusable foodware study could inform strategies to reduce plastic entering aquatic ecosystems by piloting solutions to reduce the amount of single-use plastic that ultimately becomes waste.

A birds-eye-view of an IISD-ELA mesocosm experiment exploring the effects of plastic pollution on aquatic ecosystems.

[1] See more on the strategy here: https://www.toronto.ca/services-payments/recycling-organics-garbage/waste-management/reducing-single-use-takeaway-items/single-use-takeaway-items-reduction-strategy-bylaw/

[2] See more on our plastics research here: https://www.iisd.org/ela/researchers/our-research/plastics/

2. Background

Plastic pollution is a growing concern worldwide and in Canada. In 2022, over 73,000 tonnes of plastic waste was released into the environment—just in Canada (Statistics Canada, 2026). This number is expected to rise over time as plastic demand grows. Plastic packaging, which is single-use by nature, is the number one contributor of plastic waste, with a significant portion of this originating in the food and drink sector (Environment and Climate Change Canada [ECCC], 2020). Plastic packaging includes bottles, plastic bags, food wrapping, films, and flexible packaging, among others. Single-use plastics, including single-use foodware, account for the majority of plastic debris found on Canadian shorelines during beach cleanups (Ocean Wise, 2025). Single-use plastic has an extremely short life cycle, as it is typically discarded shortly after use, making up 47% of total plastic waste generated (ECCC, 2020).

To introduce policies to reduce plastic pollution, the federal government listed manufactured plastic items as "toxic" under Schedule 1 of the Canadian Environmental Protection Act (1999). Plastic debris harms wildlife and can cause death in turtles, birds, and marine mammals (Murphy et al., 2025). Once in the environment, plastic breaks down into microplastics, which can also harm wildlife—for example, concentrations in the Great Lakes are known to be hazardous (Kidd et al., 2024). Plastics may also cause potential harm to human cells (Danopoulos et al., 2022). Microplastics have been found in a variety of food items (Milne et al., 2024), which could be due in part to contamination from packaging food in plastic (Jadhav et al., 2021).

To reduce plastic pollution, the Canadian government has implemented a ban on some single-use plastics as part of the Single-use Plastics Prohibition Regulations, including checkout bags, straws, cutlery, and some foodservice ware, stir sticks, and ring carriers.3 Additionally, Ontario's newly enhanced recycling program allows residents to recycle more materials, including single-use coffee cups, as of January 1, 2026. This is part of a step toward a harmonized national framework to move to extended producer responsibility, making producers responsible for recycling costs (Circular Materials, 2026a). However, Manitoba has not upgraded its recycling system to accept coffee cups yet. Multi-Material Stewardship Manitoba is currently in the process of transitioning to extended producer responsibility (Circular Materials, n.d.).

Many people think that switching to biodegradable, compostable, or biobased plastics is the solution to plastic waste accumulation; however, it may not be the solution that people expect. Biodegradable plastics are only broken down under very specific conditions that are rarely found in the environment (ECCC, 2020). Similarly, compostable plastics are designed to biodegrade under specific conditions and are not accepted by many composting facilities in Canada (ECCC, 2019). Biobased plastics, made from renewable resources such as corn or cellulose, do not biodegrade any faster than conventional plastics (European Commission, 2019). Thus, simply switching to these materials is not the solution to reducing plastic pollution. This is important information for businesses to know, as these materials are often more expensive.

To help mitigate plastic pollution in Canada, the Government of Canada put forward Canada's Plastics Science Agenda (CaPSA) (ECCC, 2019). The CaPSA framework includes identifying research priorities for detecting, mitigating, and understanding impacts on the environment and human health; plastic design and alternatives; sustainable production; and recycling and recovery. CaPSA adopts a life-cycle approach to plastics to accelerate the transition to a more sustainable future. One of CaPSA's overarching goals is to decrease the environmental footprint of plastics, which requires introducing zero-plastic-waste principles for a circular economy. Pilots like the one we are implementing in Winnipeg fall under CaPSA's research priorities.

Reducing single-use plastic waste relies on social behavioural change through interventions. Policies are most effective when the public is on board and ready to make the change. Previous work in Toronto implemented a 3-month pilot program using reusable takeout containers for six food-service businesses (Gutierrez et al., 2024). Participating restaurants found implementing reusable practices easy and rewarding. Uptake in the program from customers was slow at first, taking a while to build momentum and create new habits; however, even modest participation led to significant waste reduction. The pilot program prevented the disposal of 884 single-use cups and lids across the six restaurants in 3 months through reuse interventions. Targeted outreach to increase awareness and interest is needed when adopting these types of programs. Reusables for takeout are becoming more popular in cities like Toronto, Banff, Calgary, and Prévost, with companies like Muuse,[3] Suppli,[4] and Bopaq[5] championing city-wide reuse programs. Winnipeg does not currently have a city-wide reuse program; however, we plan to implement a reuse pilot in 2026 for the City of Winnipeg through a partnership with Muuse.

Understanding that change can be difficult for both businesses and customers, we wanted to identify the obstacles and opportunities to change in Winnipeg, as well as the support needed to be successful in reducing single-use waste in restaurants and coffee shops.

3. Objectives

1. Determine the willingness to change through the perspectives of food-service businesses and customers in Winnipeg, Manitoba.
2. Determine the challenges and opportunities that local businesses and customers face in implementing reusables programs.

[3] https://www.muuse.io/canada

[4] https://mysuppli.ca/locations

[5] https://bopaq.com/en/

4. Methods

To learn more about the challenges and opportunities for reusable foodware programming in Winnipeg, Manitoba, we conducted a study in the summer of 2025.

We approached customers at various locations around Winnipeg and asked them to fill out a survey with 10 questions about their perspectives and practices regarding reusable and single-use foodware. The customers either scanned a QR code to the online survey or we recorded their responses through an in-person interview. The questions included gauging overall familiarity with plastic pollution, how often they eat out or dine in, and how often they partake in initiatives to reduce single-use waste by choosing reusable options.

We asked food-service businesses in Winnipeg (including full-service, fast-casual, and cafés/coffee shops) to fill out a different survey with 15 questions relating to (i) current practices with single-use and reusable foodware and (ii) their willingness to change to reusable foodware. For each business we approached, we asked to speak directly with the manager or owner, if they were present, or with another staff member in charge.

The surveys were created in the Jotform app, all participation was voluntary, and responses were anonymous. We did not collect any demographic data. Surveys were conducted with 26 food-service businesses and 50 customers in Winnipeg. We did not record identifying information of survey respondents, and responses were anonymized.

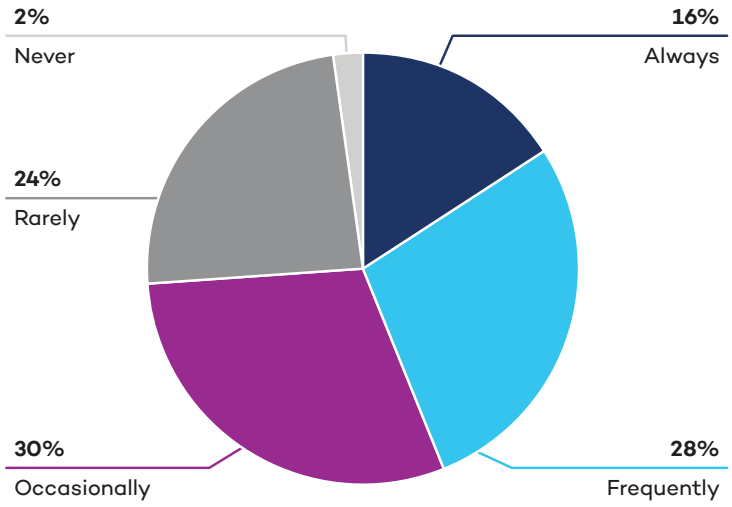
5. Results

5.1 Customer Surveys

Awareness of Environmental Issues Associated with Plastic Pollution

In our survey, 94% of respondents were either aware or very aware of the issue of plastic pollution in the environment and the growing accumulation of plastic waste. When asked how often they considered the waste generated by single-use foodware when deciding where to eat, the majority of respondents answered either occasionally (30%) or frequently (28%), while 26% responded never or rarely, and 16% responded always (Figure 1).

Figure 1. How often customers in Winnipeg consider the waste generated by single-use foodware when deciding where to eat, as indicated by survey data



Source: Survey results.

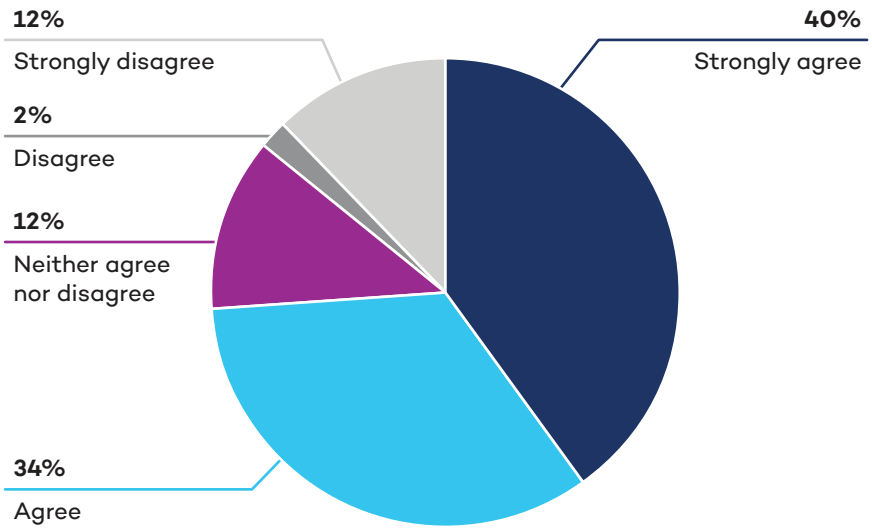
Customers on Reusable Foodware for Dining In

When asked how often they choose the reusable foodware option when dining in at fast-casual restaurants or coffee shops, the majority of respondents answered always (38%) or frequently (34%), while only 14% answered occasionally and 14% answered never or rarely.

Winnipeg Customers Think Restaurants Should Be Doing More to Reduce Single-Use Waste

When asked how much they agreed with this statement, "Restaurants and coffee shops should do more to reduce single-use foodware," respondents overwhelmingly agreed or strongly agreed (74%; Figure 2).

Figure 2. How customers in Winnipeg feel about this statement: "Restaurants and coffee shops should do more to reduce single-use foodware."



Source: Survey results.

Winnipeg Customers on BYO

The uptake of BYO in Winnipeg has not yet become popular among many customers. The majority of respondents indicated that they very rarely or never BYO (44%), while 34% reported occasional use of BYO and 22% always or very frequently participate in BYO.

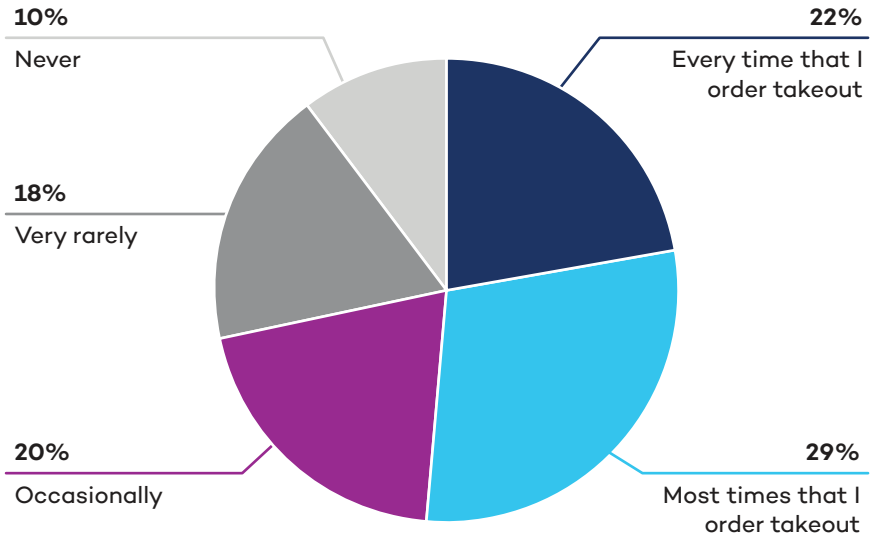
The reasons some customers do not participate in BYO include concerns around cleanliness and the inconvenience of carrying containers or cups with them. When asked what would motivate them to participate in BYO more often, some of the top answers were:

- a discount to bring my own
- all restaurants/coffee shops accepting my cup or container
- signs at the restaurants/coffee shops to remind me
- other incentives or reward systems

Winnipeg Customers Are Ready for Returnable Takeout Programs

Returnable takeout programs are not widely available in Winnipeg like they are in other cities (e.g., Banff, Toronto). We asked customers how often they would use a service to borrow or rent a cup or container if the option were available at a restaurant or coffee shop. The majority of respondents indicated they would use this option most or every time they ordered takeout (51%), while 20% would use it occasionally and 28% would very rarely or never use it (Figure 3).

Figure 3. How often customers in Winnipeg would use a returnable takeout option if it were available to them, as indicated by survey data



Source: Survey results.

When asked what would motivate them to use a returnable container service more often, respondents gave these top answers:

- if it is convenient and available at the restaurants I go to
- signs at the restaurant/coffee shop to remind me
- incentives or reward systems
- many locations available to drop off the items

Regulations to Reduce Waste in Winnipeg

We asked customers for their thoughts on some potential regulations to reduce single-use foodware. These were their responses:

- The majority of customers (82%) believe that restaurants should only give out single-use items like straws/napkins, etc., if asked first.
- 74% of respondents think restaurants should let customers bring their own cups or containers.
- 82% of respondents think restaurants should serve food and drink in reusable foodware when dining in.

When asked if restaurants should charge a fee for single-use items, 44% disagreed or strongly disagreed, 38% agreed or strongly agreed, and 19% neither agreed nor disagreed. The majority of customers believe restaurants should offer a discount if they bring their own cup or container (74%).

When asked if they had any additional comments on these potential regulations, some respondents raised concerns about the single-use item fee, stating that the onus should be on businesses rather than customers. Some respondents were also concerned with hygiene when it comes to BYO, worrying about the cleanliness of the containers. A sample of comments:

- "It should be more of an incentive rather than a punishment."
- "If they have capacity to wash dishes, they should offer reusables."
- "Regulate one-time coffee cups to be completely recyclable."
- "Incentivize larger chains to reduce waste."
- "I think fast food is creating a lot of waste. It would be good to not have so many fast food chains."

When asked if there was anything else they would like to share about their experience and plans to reduce single-use foodware, this is what Winnipeg customers had to say:

- "If you can't reduce the footprint, if you can't reuse the item, and/or if they can't recycle it, the item in question should not be allowed. Government regulation is the only way."
- "I hope you can influence the service industry as it will make the biggest impact."
- "I could do more."
- "Anything that disincentivizes usage and encourages behaviour change over time."
- "Starting to take baby steps, leveraging on a larger scale."
- "Try to be more committed to reusable coffee cups (try to remember more)."
- "I would like to see it advertised in restaurants and announced in the media" – regarding reusable takeout containers.

5.2 Foodservice Business Surveys

Types of Businesses Surveyed

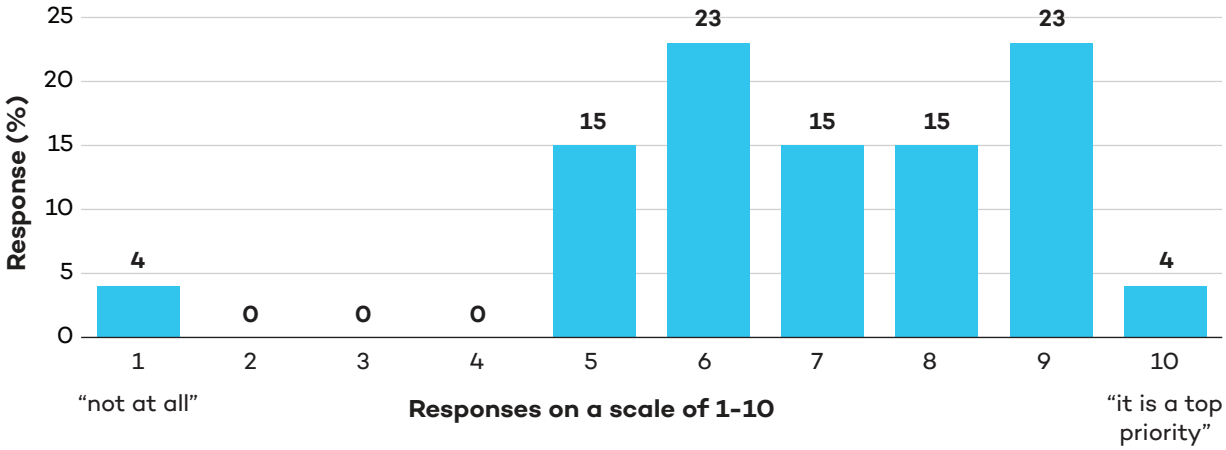
Across the 26 businesses surveyed, 42% were full-service (dine-in) restaurants, 35% were fast-casual (mix of takeout and dine in), 19% were coffee shops, and 4% were fast food (counter service only).

Awareness of Plastic Pollution

The majority of businesses indicated being very aware (42%) or aware (31%) of the issue of plastic pollution and/or a growing accumulation of plastic waste in the environment, while only 19% were somewhat aware and 8% were not familiar.

We asked businesses, on a scale of 1–10, how much they considered the environment when making business decisions. Only one business reported a number less than four, while the majority of businesses reported between 5 and 7 (53%) and 8 and 10 (42%), indicating businesses in Winnipeg care about their impact on the environment (Figure 4).

Figure 4. How much food-service businesses in Winnipeg consider the environment when making business decisions, indicated by survey data



Source: Survey results.

The Impact of the Single-Use Plastics Ban on Winnipeg Restaurants

We asked businesses an open-ended question about how the ban of some single-use items (straws, cutlery, checkout bags) affected their business. Most businesses told us they were minimally impacted by the single-use plastics ban. The main changes that businesses have made since the ban include

- switching from plastic straws to paper straws,
- switching from plastic checkout bags to paper bags,
- switching from plastic cutlery to wood or bamboo cutlery, and
- switching from plastic takeout containers to plastic or non-plastic biodegradable options.

One issue that some businesses experience due to the single-use plastics ban was the increased costs of materials (e.g., bamboo is more expensive than plastic). Customers also typically do not like paper straws, according to businesses. Some of the businesses we spoke with still use plastic straws even though they are banned.

Dine-in Foodware Practices

The majority of businesses offer reusable foodware for dining in (61%), while 26% offer single-use foodware. The rest do not have dine in or noted "other." The restaurants currently only offering single-use dine-in options would consider switching to reusables if customers accepted it, if the cost were the same, and if it were hygienic. Most restaurants do not promote reusable foodware for dining in with signage or verbally to customers.

Practices Around BYO

The majority of businesses (69%) allow customers to bring their own reusable foodware (e.g., cups, containers, bags, straws). However, 83% of businesses that allow BYO reported that only 5% or less of their customers actually bring their own reusable foodware. Considering 82% of businesses do not encourage BYO with signage or communication with customers, these numbers make sense. The uptake of BYO could be increased with more communication and reminders for customers that this option is available.

Practices Around Reusable Takeout

Only two businesses of the 26 reported implementing their own reusable takeout or deposit-return system with varying success. The items used in these systems were containers and cups that were implemented on small individual scales. The number of customers using the deposit-return system for both of these businesses was around 5%. There is currently no widespread reusable takeout system in Winnipeg, which the city would benefit from in the future.

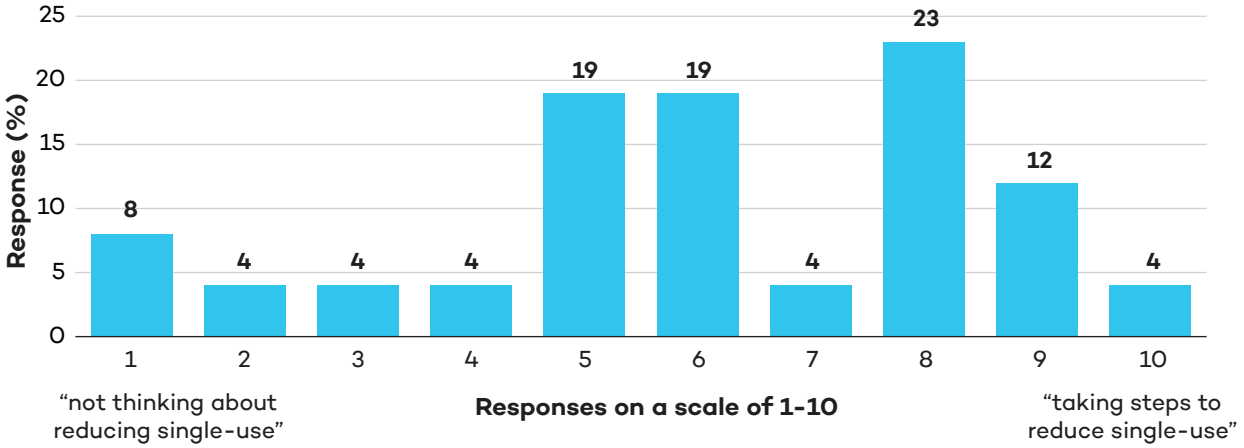
Steps Taken to Reduce Single-Use Waste and Readiness to Change

Businesses in Winnipeg are already taking some steps to reduce single-use waste. The top four steps being taken include

- asking the customer before giving out single-use items,
- providing reusable dishes for dining in,
- switching to recyclable or compostable single-use items, and
- allowing customers to bring their own reusable foodware.

When asked about their readiness to change on a scale of 1–10, the majority of businesses felt their business was a 5–7 (42%) or 8–10 (39%), with only 20% indicating 4 or less (Figure 5).

Figure 5. The readiness to change of businesses in Winnipeg, as indicated by survey data



Source: Survey results.

When asked what would further help their business needs to reduce single-use waste, the top four answers were

- financial assistance to procure reusable foodware,
- information on costs/savings,
- public health guidelines on reusables, and
- information on the environmental impact of foodware options.

Additional Comments from Winnipeg Businesses

We asked businesses if they had anything else to share about their experience or future plans to reduce waste. These are some of their comments:

- "People should be more mindful of the waste they are making. Oftentimes, people will ask for takeout packaging and eat inside."
- "Compostable should be made mandatory for all."
- "We would love for a better straw option to come out."
- "Restaurants already run on razor-thin margins, so if you want anything to be adopted across the industry, it either needs to be mandated or must make financial sense."
- "Things are changing, and people are adapting."
- "It all comes down to cost. Packaging is expensive but plastic is cheap."
- "It would help to have a funded program by government to give grants to businesses."
- "We need cultural mobilization; saving the world is a cheerful thing, not painful."
- "It's a cultural issue of habits. The onus should not be on the consumer."

6. Conclusions and Recommendations

Businesses and customers in Winnipeg are ready for change, but they need guidance and support with making the necessary changes to reduce single-use waste. Both customers and businesses are interested in more information about reusable foodware options and need guidance on how to reduce their impact.

Based on our findings, we have provided the following recommendations to reduce single-use foodware items in Winnipeg:

1. Businesses should allow BYO, incentivize it, and communicate this option to customers. Many businesses already allow customers to BYO but do not communicate this to customers verbally or with signage. Putting up signage communicating this option to customers and/or providing incentives for BYO would increase uptake and reduce single-use waste and associated costs for businesses.
2. Winnipeg would benefit from a reusable foodware program. Reusable foodware programs help to reduce waste and save costs for businesses. Other cities, like Toronto and Banff, have found success in reducing single-use waste by adopting city-wide reusable foodware programs. Given Winnipeg's extensive culinary scene, the city would benefit from adopting a city-wide reuse program.
3. Businesses need guidance and assistance from the government to procure more sustainable single-use items and reusables. Many businesses would like to reduce waste from single-use items but require more information and guidelines to make the necessary changes to switch to better single-use items and reusables. Many businesses want to know which products are better for the environment and reduce costs. They also want to understand the health guidelines around reusables. Some businesses are ready for stricter regulations to spark change across the industry. As the changes are made, some suggest they would like financial help to get started.
4. Information on reusables for customers. Customers in Winnipeg are interested in reducing single-use waste by switching to reusables but are concerned about convenience and cleanliness. Customers need guidance to feel comfortable and confident in making the switch.

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IISD EXPERIMENTAL LAKES AREA

IISD Experimental Lakes Area (IISD-ELA) is the world's freshwater laboratory. A series of 58 lakes and their watersheds in northwestern Ontario, Canada, IISD-ELA is the only place in the world where scientists can research on and manipulate real lakes to build a more accurate and complete picture of what human activity is doing to freshwater lakes. The findings from over 50 years of ground-breaking research have rewritten environmental policy around the world—from mitigating algal blooms to reducing how much mercury gets into our waterways—and aim to keep fresh water clean around the world for generations to come.

IISD-ELA is operated by the International Institute for Sustainable Development (IISD)—an independent think tank headquartered in Winnipeg situated on Treaty 1 Territory—the ancestral lands of the Anishinaabe (Ojibwe), Ininiw (Cree), Anisininew (Ojibwe Cree), Dene, and Dakota Nations, and the homeland of the Red River Métis Nation. The IISD-ELA field station is situated on the traditional land of the Anishinaabe Nation in Treaty 3 Territory and the homeland of the Métis Nation.

Head Office

111 Lombard Avenue, Suite 325
Winnipeg, Manitoba
Canada R3B 0T4

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