

Palmy's Plastic Pollution Strategy: Workshop outcomes

Report on public input provided during the Palmy Plastic Strategy Workshop
(22 June 2019, Te Manawa)

1.0 Introduction

To help develop a community-based “Plastic Pollution Strategy” for Palmerston North City (and eventually the entire Manawatu region), participants in the “Palmy Plastic Pollution Challenge: (PPPC) and members of the Palmerston North general public were invited to participate in a 22 June 2019 workshop held at Te Manawa Museum. This report synthesises some of the key initiatives and ideas recommended by workshop participants:

1. A neighbourhood pilot project to enhance care and connection to Palmerston North’s urban waterways;
2. Action on plastic food packaging;
3. Suggestions for Palmerston North City Council (PNCC) waste and recycling infrastructure and services;
4. Ideas for education and awareness raising around plastic pollution to promote behaviour change among Palmerston North residents;
5. Schools-based initiatives and youth engagement;
6. Advocacy for changes in central government waste policies and programmes;
7. Clean-up initiatives, including actions suitable for annual programs such as World Cleanup Day in September.

This list of initiatives synthesises multiple discussions from small groups working separately at different tables. Foregrounding some ideas means backgrounding others, and anyone doing additional planning is **strongly** encouraged to read the full table-by-table record of participant input found in Appendix A¹. Furthermore, this report is best read in the context of additional findings from the Palmy Plastic Pollution Challenge, because additional public input has been sought through other means (such as discussions in schools and social media comments).

¹ This list of initiatives was developed through multiple close readings of table reports and by grouping suggestions to identify themes. -- S. Stevens

2.0 Background

Following an August 2018 strategic planning workshop for environmental sector leaders, co-hosted by Environment Network Manawatu,² a team of collaborators across community, iwi, tertiary institutions, and councils conceived the “Palmy Plastic Pollution Challenge” (PPPC) under the umbrella of the Manawatū River Source to Sea Initiative. Through its first year, PPPC focused primarily on a citizen-science project to collect, remove, and quantify all types of rubbish (both plastics and non-plastics) from randomly selected stretches of Palmerston North’s urban waterways. This first phase of the PPPC launched the aim of creating a citizen-science-based picture of all forms of plastic pollution impacting the city’s urban waterways and ultimately the Manawatū River and the ocean. The PPPC project also aims to cultivate a community mandate for and commitment to further action to address plastic pollution. The PPPC project has been coordinated by a cooperative team drawn from Manawatū River Source to Sea, Environment Network Manawatu, Rangitaane o Manawatu, Palmerston North City Council, and the Massey University Zero Waste Academy.

More information on the first year of PPPC is available through the PPPC facebook page and Environment Network Manawatu (ENM). ENM have undertaken a critical role in supporting community engagement in both the PPPC citizen-science process and the incubation of the Manawatū River Source to Sea Initiative.

Following initial data collection and analysis, the PPPC team invited the general public to respond to citizen science findings, with direct invitations sent to the 225 people who had already engaged with the plastic challenge and the Manawatū River Source to Sea Initiative. The workshop aim was to go from understanding to action by developing a citizen-led plastic pollution strategy for Palmerston North city (and eventually the entire Manawatu regional catchment). Throughout the PPPC project, public input was collected from multiple sources, including school and home-school groups, feedback offered in response to a display at Te Manawa, and social media comments. This input is reported elsewhere and will be integrated into the final Palmy Plastic Pollution Strategy. Within this report, the focus is on public input from an afternoon workshop held on 22 June 2019 at Te Manawa, attended by approximately 60 persons. While most workshop participants were adults, some youth participated also, and a number of young people played a critical role in hosting, presenting and contributing ideas to this event and more broadly to the PPPC initiative³.

The workshop agenda can be found in Appendix B. More information on the structure of public input sessions is available in Appendix A. Appendix A also provides a complete record of all written public input from the day, as well as notes on oral reports.

² Palmerston North City Environmental Trust also co-hosted the planning day with financial contributions.

³ The workshop’s volunteer table facilitators had less opportunity to add their own ideas to discussions. At least one facilitator has requested a way to feed more of her own ideas into the Palmy Plastic Strategy. This and further reflective inputs have been facilitated via a cycle of consultation around the draft reporting of the strategy workshop findings. -- J. Hannon.

3.0 Participant solutions

3.1 A neighbourhood pilot project to enhance care and connection to Palmerston North's urban waterways

Participants at multiple tables suggested neighbourhood- or suburb-based projects, including:

- restoring stream habitat for diverse species (birds, tuna, fish) through planting and urban wetlands development;
- increasing human-waterway interaction through urban stream access via walkways and cycle-ways;
- increasing civic responsibility through rubbish clean-ups and by naming kaitiaki for different stretches of the stream;
- using targeted pamphlet drops and events (for example along Te Kawau) to raise awareness of and appreciation for urban streams;
- adding recycle bins within community centres and providing information when people make bookings;
- developing neighbourhood drop-off points for rubbish;
- holding free dumping days within target neighbourhoods to reduce 'fly-tipping' (illegal dumping);
- providing feedback loops for suburbs (presumably feedback both around amounts of litter accumulating in suburbs, plus any changes in response to residents' actions).

A holistic pilot project focused on one stretch of Te Kawau could integrate many of these solutions. Te Kawau presents challenges because it is a "squeezed stream" with development up to its edge in many places, steep sides in many places, and stormwater management issues. Highbury has more open stream edges, which make it an ideal pilot neighbourhood.

A starting point could be neighbourhood awareness-raising through pamphlet drops and/or events to increase appreciation for the stream and to invite participation in rubbish reduction, clean-ups, and restoration and development efforts.

For rubbish reduction, PNCC could work with neighbourhood residents to identify practical solutions. Workshop participants had multiple suggestions that require PNCC resources: more rubbish bins, neighbourhood recycling (and possibly rubbish collection) at community centres, and monthly free dumping days to reduce the difficulty and cost of legal disposal. Workshop participants also called for increased community ownership and civic responsibility⁴.

Clean-up could involve finding community groups to registering as kaitiaki of identified stretches of the stream by making an ongoing clean-up commitment. Kaitiaki could be schools and

4 Actions should avoid signalling that rubbish is PNCC's problem: it's all of our problem. Community ownership might be enhanced by working with the selected neighbourhood to identify which options to trial within a pilot. Actions should be monitored for unintended consequences: no one wants "free rubbish" to lead to lots of rubbish. A research literature review might support good project design. — S. Stevens

community groups, or, in steeper areas, businesses like Higgins, who may be better equipped to manage health and safety risks.

The primary goal of the pilot would be to increase care and connection to the stream by enhancing Te Kawau's positive qualities. Participants suggested park-style developments. Plantings and wetland development would restore habitat, help manage stormwater, and increase amenity value. Walkways and cycle-ways would further increase residents' appreciation for Te Kawau, and signs could draw attention to the stream's history and its heritage and ecological values.

A high-quality, holistic pilot has several advantages. It would offer opportunities to develop the quality awareness-raising materials that workshop participants requested, including inspiring photographs and films. A pilot could include research to identify its most effective elements: these could then be rolled out on a larger scale through Palmerston North. For example, it may require only a little dedicated coordinator time to register kaitiaki city-wide.

3.2 Action on plastic food packaging

Participants at multiple tables addressed issues associated with the ubiquity of single-use plastic food packaging: in fact, after awareness-raising, this may be the most common theme across tables. Food packaging solution ideas included awareness-raising, bans, and re-usable and compostable alternatives (for example, paper, cardboard, and wool packaging options, plus sterilisable glass and metal bring-back containers).

Participants also wanted a policy mandate requiring producers to eco-label their packaging. At least two tables suggested a phone app eco-labelling solution, such as a "Packaging Switch" app similar to "FoodSwitch New Zealand". They wanted to be able to scan an item to receive easily interpreted feedback on the packaging, for example through a traffic light system, colour coding, or an approach modeled after health stars. They wanted the app to be free, fun, and interactive, and they suggested that supermarkets could sponsor competitions for kids to find eco-packaged treats. They wanted ways for users to provide feedback to improve the app. Perhaps Massey or UCOL students could take on this project, although participants also suggested other possible development routes.

The app could be developed on its own, but it would also fit as a project under the umbrella of the currently inert Manawatu Food Action Network (MFAN), as well as under the Palmy Plastic Pollution Challenge. MFAN was a cross-sector initiative to increase regional food resilience. After an initial early development phase, the network became inactive due to lack of resources, particularly due to the absence of a (paid) coordinator. That said, many of the network's participating organisations remain active.

Participants offered many food packaging reduction ideas that have a high degree of overlap with MFAN goals. These include growing more food locally (including through private and community gardens), sharing homegrown and homemade foods, teaching cooking from 'real' ingredients, and generally connecting people to their food supply. These actions would reduce the amount of packaging used in food transport and supermarket sales.

Participants noted that food safety and food safety regulations might limit possible solutions. They recognised our elders can help with ideas because, not long ago, people lived without so much packaging. What did they do? How can we learn from them and do the same?

3.3 Suggestions for Palmerston North City Council (PNCC) waste and recycling infrastructure and services

Ideally, participants wanted to reduce plastic at the source, but they also discussed how to put rubbish and recycling in the right place. Many of their ideas depended on PNCC infrastructure. They wanted easier and less expensive ways to dispose of rubbish legally. They wanted a way to recycle polystyrene locally. They requested that PNCC events (e.g. in The Square) be plastic free, and they wanted councils to regulate food truck containers (compostable only). They wanted more water refill stations to encourage people to bring their own instead of buying bottled water.

See Section 3.1 (describing a neighbourhood pilot project) for additional suggestions for pathways, green infrastructure, rubbish disposal, and PNCC-led pamphlet drops and events. These ideas have city-wide relevance beyond a neighbourhood pilot.

3.4 Ideas for education and awareness-raising around plastic pollution to promote behaviour change among Palmerston North residents

At the workshop, one of the tables had a specific education and awareness-raising focus, but all tables found themselves discussing awareness raising to some degree. Some of the quickest-to-action ideas included:

- raising awareness of personal actions people could take;
- increasing understanding of the impacts of plastics;
- promoting leadership in plastic reduction.

Some of the ideas that fall under these categories are listed in Appendix C, a quick report on Plastic-free July ideas. A more complete list of participant requests is available in Appendix A, the record of participant input.

Many participant comments highlighted the importance of positive messages and small-step suggestions that don't overwhelm people. One approach was rewarding businesses and other community champions with certificates and window stickers. These would let consumers know where to shop, and they would also spread the message that the community values packaging solutions. Participants suggested creating a network of zero-waste suppliers. They also recommended using apps for awareness-raising: see Section 3.2 (food packing actions) and Section 3.7 (clean-up campaigns).

The positive approach wasn't the only approach, however. Participants suggested naming and shaming harmful packaging. Participants from several tables referred to anti-smoking campaigns: they want litter and poor packaging to become socially unacceptable just like smoking. Specifically,

they asked for a new politics focused on long-term political cycles rather than three-year terms, with champions such as Tariana Turia; for visual impact education with packaging showing the negative health and ecological impacts of that packaging; and for signs in public spaces and on rubbish and recycling bins.

Additionally, participants wanted to see a global change in mind-set, moving away from a “disposable society” “addicted to convenience” (such as “fast fashion”) to one where people see themselves as a part of nature and act accordingly: “I am nature; nature is me”. They called for kaitiakitanga, civic responsibility, and product stewardship. They wanted re-localisation, and they also wanted circular economies modelled after nature’s cycles, that is, working “cradle to cradle” with all materials having an economic reuse function or else returning to natural systems in beneficial ways (e.g. as compost).

Finally, participants noted the importance of using multiple means to get the message out: blogs, apps, film, community news, social media, and more. They advised targeting different groups, such as community groups, schools, religious groups, international students, farmer’s markets and other public gatherings and events, and they asked that campaigns include specialised populations like the deaf community.

3.5 Schools-based initiatives and youth engagement

Schools, especially primary schools, were regularly identified as a starting point for change. There were multiple schools-based clean-up suggestions: see Section 3.7.

Schools could also take on the challenge of declaring themselves “single-use plastic free”. They could start by reducing plastic packaging for stationery, and maybe even reduce plastic within stationery. Students could be given beeswax wraps, and/or they could make them in school workshops. Gardening could be taught and/or encouraged, with children bringing their school lunches from home gardens rather than shops.

Plastics research and solutions could be included in school science fairs, and children and youth could volunteer for plastics research with community groups and similar.

Participants thought primary schools were a better starting point than secondary schools in part because they perceived that youth believe “eco isn’t cool”. Suggestions for involving youth included games (see Section 3.7 on clean-ups) and film-making. Senior students could volunteer with community groups or with eco-businesses, gaining job skills and opportunities. Linkages between schools and community groups (such as Environment Network Manawatu) were encouraged.

3.6 Advocacy for changes in central government waste policies and programmes

Many of participants' ideas for solutions require action from central government. The community and local government have a critical advocacy role in making these ideas happen.⁵

Identified policy change priorities include:

- bans on single-use plastics, starting with food packaging and commercial plastics (possibly waiting to address the health industry);
- more particularly, bans on plastic produce bags, takeaway containers, cutlery, and straws (including requiring compostable fast food and food truck containers);
- mandatory eco-labelling.

In a more general sense, participants wanted policy to be informed by the precautionary principle. For example, the micro-plastics and nano-plastics group noted that while the health impacts of nano-plastics are not yet known—largely due to the costs of research—we do know that nano-plastics can pass through cell walls, and we also know that micro-plastics have negative health impacts. The precautionary principle would urge significant reductions in both micro- and nano-plastics. Similarly, the health and ecological impacts of plastics in roading are not yet fully understood. More research is required to support more conscious decision-making.

Participants also wanted policy to be informed by full-cost accounting, product stewardship, and the “polluter pays” principle. For example, the commercial packaging table recommended the development of a hub for the return of commercial and transport packaging. They expected industry producers and freight companies to fund the costs of the hub and the logistics of making producers take responsibility. Similarly, they wanted supermarkets to be required to take back packaging, and they pushed for bottle return schemes, either through incentive deposits or through bar-coding and scans to identify who “owns” bottles.

Even individual polluters should pay, some participants suggested, with fines for littering. They noted that places like Singapore have effectively no litter.

Participants also wanted an increase in research and development funding. For example, participants wanted researchers to help identify the most effective strategies for behaviour change, and they wanted researchers to develop new alternatives to our current packaging. They wanted to understand the health and ecological impacts of plastics. In general, they wanted policy to be informed by research.

Participants asked for an integrated policy framework that takes a broad spectrum approach, addressing everything from production to use, and considering recycling while recognising that recycling is only one part of a holistic solution. Both penalties (e.g. bottled water taxes) and incentives (e.g. bottle deposits) have a place.

⁵ Advocacy could be promoted through existing ENM infrastructure, for example by sending targeted mailings to those interested. A team of advisors (perhaps including workshop speakers Dr. Trisia Farrelly and Jonathan Hannon from Massey University) could offer relevant information and possibly also use the route to request public input to demonstrate backing for their own actions. — S. Stevens

3.7 Clean-up Campaigns

Many participant suggestions were suitable for September's World Cleanup Day focus or for other clean-up campaigns.

One idea with potential long-term benefits would be a campaign to register groups as kaitiaki for different stretches of urban waterways. These could be schools, community groups, and businesses. Appropriately skilled and resourced businesses (such as Higgins crews in waders) could take on steep stream stretches that pose the biggest safety challenges. An initial campaign push could set up a kaitiaki register, with some ongoing coordination to sustain and renew it. (See also section 3.1.)

Council could provide additional alternatives to illegal dumping. See Sections 3.1 and 3.4.

Awareness-raising campaigns would also be appropriate for World Cleanup Day: "Don't drop it".

Additional ideas include games, challenges, and clean-up competitions. For example, schools could compete for prizes by seeing which could pick up the most litter⁶. Another challenge could be delivered through social media: post pictures of litter with a hashtag, for example, or make use of the Litterati app (<https://www.litterati.org>).

Participants also noted that Litterati could help the city understand our pollution problems. They suggested that summer interns could use the app to provide research data while doing clean-ups.

4.0 Conclusion: From ideas to action

The Palmy Plastic Strategy Workshop was characterised by high turn-out (standing room only for presentations) and high energy levels during participant-led discussions. This energy coupled with the wide range of participant suggestions indicates that Palmerston North's community is highly motivated to address Palmy's plastic pollution, ideally by reductions in plastic at the source, wholesale cultural change, and product stewardship, but also through citizen clean-up actions where these are required.

By all appearances, the first year of the Palmy Plastic Pollution Challenge (PPPC) has been effective at bringing people together and raising public awareness and participation around shared aims. It is clear that many citizens are prepared to put their own time and energy into helping solve this (and potentially other) environmental problems. Ideally further action will be taken soon to draw on the motivation and momentum that has developed around the PPPC. Some of the suggestions in this report can be acted on immediately by individuals and by groups using existing resources.

Most of the suggestions, however, require additional resources, cooperation, and coordination, including appropriate leadership and expertise to take citizens' ideas and to develop them into practical action plans. This is particularly true of some of the more holistic and complex ideas, such as those that address pollution at the source and those oriented to long-term increases in citizen

6 Query: Would finding the most litter stigmatise a school's neighbourhood? Would a litter reward incentivise bringing rubbish from home? If these concerns are warranted, perhaps they could be avoided by busing all students to a shared or contiguous streamside reserve and holding a time-limited competition: multiple schools working in the same general area for two hours, for example. — S.Stevens.

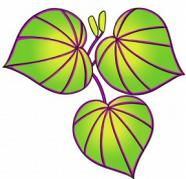
responsibility and culture change. Appropriate support from key institutional stakeholders is needed to secure key resources for future efforts. These key resources include sufficient coordinator time.

Additionally, it is highly unlikely that all of the seven recommended actions (and their variants available in Appendix A) can be acted on in full, or at once, by just the leadership of a single organisation: it will be necessary to continue relying on the multi-organisational participation, cross-sector collaboration, and deep community engagement that has so far characterised the Palmy Plastic Pollution Challenge.

For a report summary plus appendices, please see:

<https://enm.org.nz/about/palmy-plastic-challenge/pppc-report>

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