

BEST PRACTISES IN PLASTIC-FREE SOLUTIONS

The BALTIPLAST project co-financed by Interreg BSR helps to drive the transition to a green and resilient Baltic Sea region.

Roadmap for Sustainable Plastic Usage in City Operations HELSINKI, FINLAND

Photo: Hannu Bask / City of Helsinki



HELSINKI is the capital of Finland, located on the northern coast of the Gulf of Finland. It is the largest city in Finland with a population of 674 000 (Helsinki), 1 555 000 (Helsinki Region). The City of Helsinki is also the largest employer in Finland with more than 37 000 employees.

Environmental leadership is an important value and goal for the city. Helsinki has multiple programmes and guidelines regarding e.g., circular economy and reducing litter, addressing plastic-related challenges, but didn't yet have a document dedicated for sustainable plastic usage.

City of Helsinki is promoting sustainability and drives to be a pioneer in environmental management. However, sustainable use of plastics is not yet covered by a designated action plan or guideline, which raised the need for a document focusing on SUPs. Roadmap for Sustainable Plastic Usage in City Operations is a document which covers all city departments and addresses concrete actions to reduce SUP usage.

Challenges and actions

City of Helsinki drives to be a pioneer in environmental management both nationally and internationally. Helsinki has a wide entity of ecological sustainability programs and guidelines, but was lacking a document focusing on plastics and plastics usage. The municipal government had earlier made the decision that plastics should be comprehensively covered in some way – as part of other programmes, or as a separate document, and this was the main approach when starting the development of the roadmap.

The challenge was to create a roadmap for increasing the knowledge of sustainable plastic usage and engage all city departments to reduce plastics and shift towards circular economy. By engaging all departments, it was possible to cover the wide range of city operations. Increasing awareness about plastics throughout the City organization, it can be also disseminated also to students and others local citizens.

The roadmap has two main approaches:

- 1) covering the life cycle of plastics within the city operations via instructions for procurement process, plastic usage and recycling;
- 2) recognizing the characteristic features of different department's ways of using plastics, and giving recommendations for action.

Brief description of activities

The development process started with **discussions about the goals and approaches** for the document with close colleagues and managers. **Benchmarking and learning from other**, similar documents from cities like Västerås and Stockholm helped to find inspiration and possible frameworks for Helsinki.

A study was commissioned **examining plastic waste and its sources within the city operations**. The study provided an overall picture of the amounts of plastic waste generated across different departments. If some operations were missing, the information was provided by other projects or programmes.

Working group with representatives from other divisions or services within the city was formed to ensure conversation and communication between departments. The working group provided a platform for co-development and knowledge sharing among environmental experts from different city divisions.

Target groups

City departments

Citizens

Timeline

Timeline	Actions
August 2023	The team and managers assessed the starting point and started benchmarking. A study on the plastic streams in the City of Helsinki operations was conducted to offer background for the measures.
Spring 2024	Gathering and meeting the working group for the first time. Creating the upper level guidelines for the whole city: procurement, usage and recycling.
Autumn 2024	Engaging one-on-one discussions with working group members to develop measures. Writing process of the document starts.
Spring 2025	Developing the measures for city divisions. More one-on-one discussions with relevant stakeholders are held. Writing process continues. Communicating about the guidelines to stakeholders.
June 2025	Finishing the document.

Results

From the study conducted about plastic waste streams in the city operations, we learned that **education and healthcare** produce a lot of plastics, but from different reasons. **Food packaging and plastic bags** are overall one of the biggest sources of plastic waste. Healthcare uses plastics for **safety and hygiene**, and most of it is not necessary or even possible to reduce or substitute. Information about **construction and infrastructure** sector's plastic usage was covered by another project within the city.

The sustainable use of plastics should be based on reducing plastics, which is why **waste hierarchy** was chosen for the framework. Plastic "lifetime" in the context of city operations was categorized to procurement (including the planning process), usage and waste management, and for all three, upper level guidelines were developed to concern all city divisions.

For more concrete actions, **action recommendations** were developed to engage different divisions. Action recommendations encourage to take action and help to find ways of implementing the roadmap goals in the future, since the roadmap is not a binding document in itself.

The *BALTIPLAST Steps for developing and implementing the strategic framework* document was used for the process. Example documents from other partners were used in benchmarking and shaping the form of the strategic document.

As a result of the development process, the City of Helsinki will have a better understanding on how to include plastics as part of the sustainability and environmental work, and reduce the use of plastics in operations where it is not necessary.

Enablers



- + **Strong support from the stakeholders and interest of target groups** is vital for engaging all stakeholders in the development process. When the work is seen as important and topical, it is easier to find information and right people for the working group.
- + **Political interest** is important in city organizations for any strategic work – political decisions steer the city's interests and offer resources.
- + **Engagement from city departments** increases implementation. In large, complex organizations, stakeholders inside the organization are an important part of not only the development process, but also the implementing phase.

Barriers



- **High demand for human resources** to manage the development process. Especially when building conversation between divisions and developing a framework and a concept, a lot of time consuming actions are needed – networking, finding contacts, reading and learning, and communicating with wide groups of stakeholders.
- **Financial constraints** might pose a risk for including measures that demand separate budgeting. When political support is needed in budgeting, there is always a risk for not reaching the desired budgets. If the budget is allocated, the responsible person/department has to be committed in it.
- **Lack of commitment** is sometimes faced with guiding (level III) documents. Guidelines are not necessarily monitored, which allows room for not following them.

Key takeaways

Development work is all about co-operation and the right people coming together. Learning from others, setting clear goals and choosing the framework early in the process is important. **When the political will is present, cities are brilliant organizations to implement actions that build a more sustainable future for all.**