

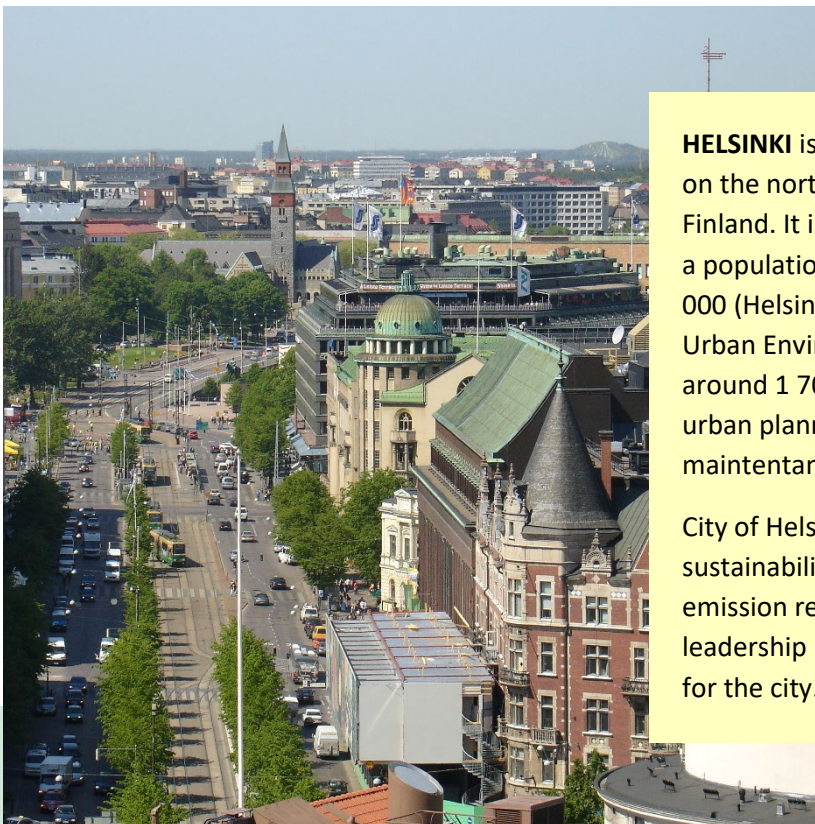
BEST PRACTISES IN PLASTIC-FREE SOLUTIONS

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

Plastic inventory and awareness raising in Urban Environment Division

HELSINKI, FINLAND

Photo: Mika Lappalainen / 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 personnel of the Urban Environment Division consist of around 1 700 professionals working with urban planning, construction, maintenance and environmental services.

City of Helsinki is active in promoting sustainability, circular economy and emission reductions, and environmental leadership is an important value and goal for the city.

This pilot in City of Helsinki's Urban Environment Division focused on awareness raising, promoting sorting of waste in the facilities, and finding measures to reduce the use of plastics in daily activities. Plastic inventory was conducted from waste bins in the office facilities, and the most effective "low-hanging fruits", easy and low-cost measures to reduce SUP's were recognized.

Challenges and actions

The City of Helsinki organization is divided into four divisions and the Central Administration. The division of Urban Environment is responsible for planning, construction and maintenance as well environmental service. The administration building is the main office for not only the Urban Environment Division, but also e.g., the Education Division, and the daily life and operations consume a lot of plastic waste. Helsinki promotes sustainability and circular economy, and for that, reducing plastics and raising awareness of the issue is important for all of those working in the organization.

To be able to reduce plastics in the administration building, it was important to understand, what kind of plastics is being consumed daily and how much. BALTIPLAST “Plastic Inventory” was introduced to investigate the plastic streams. In a large building with an efficient cleaning system from an outside service provider, the inventory was conducted by going through the **waste bins that are located in the office and kitchen**.

The most important goal was to recognize those plastic waste sources that can be influenced through awareness raising or proposals for procurement.

Brief description of activities

The pilot started with the inventory of plastic waste from the waste bins in the office and lunch break kitchens of the administration building. All waste category bins were included, since waste separation percentage might not always be 100 %, and in Finland, many types of waste that include plastics are not sorted as plastic packaging (e.g. TetraPaks are sorted as cardboard). Plastic waste was collected out of the bins, and was further categorized according to the Inventory Tool.

After identifying the main sources of plastic waste, a set of solutions was outlined to help reduce them. Some of these measures focused on **raising awareness among staff** working in the office, while others took a more **regulatory and strategic approach**.

The awareness efforts began shortly afterward. **Campaigns** were launched in collaboration with another project pilot, creating a sense of shared momentum. At the same time, **more visible and comprehensive waste-sorting instructions** were placed near the bins in lunch break kitchens, making it easier for everyone to dispose of waste correctly.

Target groups

City employees

City operations

Timeline

Inventory itself took **only 1 working day** (inventory only on the trash bins in two floors). Planning the reduction measures took a couple of weeks.

The whole process took longer than expected due to communication challenges with the stakeholders.

The reduction measures are discussed with people responsible for cleaning operations and procurement during the year 2025. This is planned to do in synergy with other procurement-related development work that is being conducted during the year 2025.

Results

The biggest sources of plastic waste turned out to be **food packaging from lunches and snacks, tea bags, and trash bags**. Among these, trash bags were found to be a particularly impactful leverage point. They were being used in large quantities, especially since bins were emptied several times a day. Maintaining high cleanliness standards in a large office facility plays a role here – and tackling this issue may require changes to cleaning contracts, which can be a time-consuming process.

The inventory also revealed a **wide range of waste-sorting habits** among the personnel. While some employees were highly enthusiastic about recycling, others were less engaged. This highlighted a key area for improvement: raising awareness around the sustainable use of plastics. In this case, the necessary infrastructure was already in place, but what was missing was consistent awareness and participation.

Another key insight from the process was the **importance of involving cleaning services** when quantifying plastic waste streams in buildings with efficient maintenance routines. Their participation can be incredibly valuable, since can help by setting aside plastic waste over a longer period, or even by co-planning the process from the start. Involving them early also ensures they're prepared to support any measures that are later put into action.

Enablers



- + This can be implemented **in synergy with other awareness raising campaigns**, where the employees are being engaged in the process as citizens – their action and lead matters
- + The actual inventory of the plastic waste is **not time consuming** – just be well prepared!

Barriers



- For a deeper survey of the plastic waste streams, stakeholders such as **facility cleaning provider and procurement unit need to be engaged** in the process.
- Reducing plastics demands **behavioral change from the employees**.
- For the inventory it's important that **plastic packaging is sorted correctly**. Still, **other waste has to be considered**, since in Finland e.g. Tetrapak-packaging, takeaway cups etc. are sorted as cardboard.
- In larger municipal entities, many measures demand **time and human resources** if they include procurement or changes in contracts.

Key takeaways

In the administration building office and common areas, **food and snacks packaging is the largest source for plastic waste**. Employees can be engaged and different ways to inspire them to reduce plastics can be found, e.g. encouraging to make lunch at home, cook together or bring homemade snacks for the whole team. However, this is time consuming and behavioral change of private people is not always a piece of cake.

More effective measures include for example **reducing the amount of waste bags / emptying and changing a new bag less frequently**. Or, if the common kitchens also use common food products, **larger economy-sized packs** could be purchased. These are examples of measures that might demand **negotiations with the procurement unit or in the service contracts** (facility cleaning etc.). However, if these aspects are being taken into account when planning the inventory process and the schedule, the success rate will be higher.