



Waste Audit - Step-by-step instructions for Teachers

The aim of a waste audit is to work out what waste is produced at your school and how well you are using your current recycling/composting bins. You can then use the results to help you improve and contribute to the waste pillar of your Climate Action Plan.

These instructions give details of how a waste audit could be conducted in schools but will be varied according to the circumstances of the school and the students involved. There is also a glossary of terms at the end of the document.

The key thing is that you need **one day of waste** from across all areas of the school - this includes playground bins, toilet bins*, staffroom bins and those from offices and classrooms as well as the kitchen and dining area.

*Please remove any sanitary waste from staff toilet bins prior to waste audit. [Click here for reusable period product options.](#)

The day before the audit takes place:

ALL general waste bins, recycling boxes or bags and compost caddies should be empty at the start of the day. You only want one days' worth of waste from the beginning of the school day to the end of that same day. (It is important to note that you don't want to be sorting through waste that has been hanging around for a few days or over the weekend).

TOP TIP - *It is really important to get the cleaning/caretaker team on board to help with the correct collection and labelling of the bags*



The cleaning team/site staff need to empty all bins as usual, tie up bags and **label where they came from** (a sharpie pen is good on white bags or sticky labels securely put on black bags with good clear writing - this is important so we can track where the waste comes from).



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The labelled bags should then be stored in the school hall or in another large space ready for the audit the next morning. If possible, make sure the recycled waste bags be placed in a separate pile from the general waste bag.

TOP TIP - Using an indoor, non-carpeted area is your best place to do a waste audit. A gust of wind easily blows away the waste in an outdoor session, and bin juice and carpets are not a good combo!

You will need:

- 3-4 sets of digital spring balances (working and/or charged which display mass in g or kg)
- Cards labelled with the different categories of materials (see below for the full list)
- Some spare bin bags
- Enough waterproof gloves for expected number and size of participants
- A tarpaulin or two to tip the waste out onto
- A broom, dustpan and brush
- A large space such as the school hall
- Clipboards and Scrap paper for recording results
- Tablet/camera to take pictures of what you find

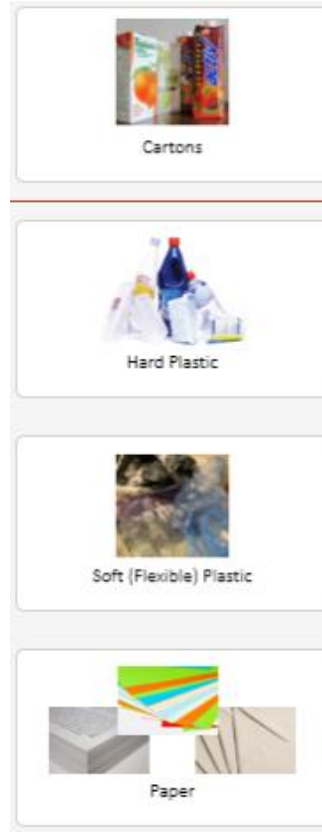


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- Waste audit materials, labelled on card
 - Cartons
 - Hard Plastic (e.g. water bottles, yogurt pots, cleaning bottles etc.)
 - Soft (Flexible) Plastic (e.g. bread bags)
 - Paper
 - Electrical equipment, batteries & printer cartridges
 - Card & Cardboard
 - Paper towels
 - Metal
 - Glass
 - Other (e.g. crisp packets, coffee cups etc.)
 - Uncooked food and garden waste
 - Cooked food waste

[Click here to get a copy of these Waste Audit materials for you to print out at school.](#)



TOP TIPS - If your school has two tarpaulins, do use both with them slightly overlapping over each other. This gives you more space to sort the waste, as the waste generally spread out a lot over the course of the audit.

Using waterproof gloves keeps everyone safe, as the contents of the bags are often covered in liquid.



Risk Assessment

Please see generic risk assessment below, this will need to be changed to reflect risk in your own setting. Remember to include risks from sharp objects within the rubbish, possible pathogens on used tissues and how to carry bags safely.

Risk assessment template:

School name:

Assessment carried out by:

Date of next review:

Date assessment was carried out:

What are the hazards?	Who might be harmed and how?	What are you already doing to control the risks?	What further action do you need to take to control the risks?	Who needs to carry out the action?	When is the action needed by?	Done
Cuts from sharp object in rubbish and recycling	Children and staff	Wearing gloves; Careful carrying of bags - away from body and legs, never over the shoulder	Brief group on these risks and how to safely carry bags in the Intro	All	During the audit	
Falls, trips and slips	All	Keep waste area tidy; sweep up regularly, mop up spills.	Brief group on these risks	All	During the audit	
Contact with bacteria and viruses	All	Wash hands before and after, wear gloves to sort waste, adults to supervise	Brief group on these risks	All	During the audit	

On the day of the audit

The Eco Team/class need to be released from normal class for the whole morning and come to the hall/space

- Intro - explain why you are doing the Waste Audit - where does general waste go? And recycling? What do the students expect to find?





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- Health & Safety (H&S) briefing (key points - refer to Risk Assessment for full details):
- How to put gloves on and off - don't touch their hair or face (demonstrate itching nose with arm) - leave gloves on floor where you can find them if you need to take off
- Carrying bags - low and don't swing them - be sensible!
- General movements around - slow and careful.

TOP TIPS - If the bags are too heavy for your students to pick up for weighing, tell them to ask an adult for help. This helps avoid injuries.

Tell students to not walk through the middle of the tarpaulin, as this leads to waste being spread all over the room

Tell your students to not kneel or sit on the tarpaulin



Please note that if time is limited to complete these activities, then the weighing of the bags/ looking for contamination in the recycling and sorting the general waste can happen at the same time. A smaller group of students supervised by an adult can weigh the bags/ observe for recycling contamination whilst the other group start sorting through the general waste as per the instructions below. Pupils can swap around jobs to



help everyone remain engaged in the activities and they can report back when there is time to pause and reflect.

Weighing the bags:

- Demonstrate how to weigh bags and read the weight (decide whether to use kg or g but make sure just to use one!)
- Get the students to work in pairs picking up a bag, weighing it and lining up with the bag and the scales to tell you or a teacher what it says on the label (as in what classroom the bag has come from) and what it weighs
 - i. Perhaps ask the group to explain the class/room names on the bin bag (e.g. is this a KS1 classroom? Or a KS2 classroom?) before you start as this can get very confusing!
 - ii. Double check if the weight you are given seems realistic and reweigh if necessary
- Once weighed, put the bags into two separate piles - one for recycling and the other for general waste, checking that all bags are still labelled securely
- Double check the list to see if any rooms have been missed and make sure you understand the data as it has been recorded (this data is inputted in the sources of waste tab on the spreadsheet, see spreadsheet example at the bottom of this document)



Checking the recycling:

Either:

- Spread out a tarpaulin on the floor - explain about walking around rather than across the tarpaulin and perhaps practice getting it flat by getting the students to stand on the edges. Ask 2 or 3 student or pairs of students to write notes on what we find - give each a clipboard with some scrap paper (this info will be useful in writing up your report).
- Ensure a member of staff is taking photographs of the materials found.



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- Tip the recycling into the middle of the tarpaulin one bag at a time - reading the label of where it has come from for each one. (can be useful to keep the headteachers bag/staff room bag to the end to maintain engagement)
- Get the students to help look for contamination (explain this word, see definition in Glossary) and remove it where possible (but remember this activity is about recording contamination not necessarily about removing it if this is too difficult - e.g. food waste in with paper)
- Pack the recycling into appropriate bags/containers, rescuing some bags, if possible, to use for the general waste audit. It can also be good to keep a display of all the surprising items found and make sure a photo is taken of that - some schools have made a best class/recycler trophy from items found

OR

- If the recycling bags are see through and time is limited, look through the clear sacks to observe for any contamination



- Ask 2 or 3 students or pairs of students to write notes on what we find - give each a clipboard with some scrap paper (this info will be useful in writing up your report)
- Pause and reflect:
- This is a good time to have a break and have a group discussion if that fits with the school day



General waste sorting:

- Lay out the cards with different waste audit material categories around the tarpaulin and put a bag next to the card (see photo on the right). You might want to keep glass, electricals and other less likely categories on a side table.
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- Remind students about H & S, particularly glass or other sharp objects - if there's anything they're not sure about, don't touch!
-
- Allocate some students to hold bags and check what is put in if the group is large (can swap in and out).
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- Ask others to use clipboards record items found which could have been reduced, reused or recycled (again, this is useful for the written report).
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- Tip a bag at a time into the middle and get sorting! Good to sweep the rubbish into the middle from time to time and sweep up residue into non-recyclable if needed.
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- Keep the energy up with verbal encouragement and swapping in and out of students as needed.



TOP TIP: It's very important for an adult to check the contents of each bag when they are emptied onto the tarpaulin before letting the students sort through them as sometimes there are items that you really don't want the kids picking up. E.g. soiled underwear or medical waste etc.



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General waste weighing:

- Make sure all bags are tied up with their laminated category label on top
- Get students to work in pairs to weigh the bags and bring the bag, label and scales to you to record. Emphasise that the label must stay with the bag(s)
- Record the weights of each category (this is recorded in the first audit data tab of the spreadsheet)
- Put the bags in two separate piles for recyclable and non-recyclable - good to get a photo of this, if possible, maybe with a big label saying: 'this could have been recycled!'





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Tidy up and wrap up

- Get the group to help move the bags to where the school wants them - possibly in external bins which may help you collect waste carrier details
- Check you have all the data recorded clearly
- Plenary - what have we learnt? - refer to workshop plan (which also talks about doing calculations at this point, only do so if it fits in with your students' learning)





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After the day:

Record all the data in the Waste Audit Spreadsheet. [Click here for an example of the spreadsheet.](#)

- Use Waste Audit spreadsheet and graphs with the class as the stimulus for some further work/reflection
- Identify what actions to include on your Action Plan and what support you may require
- Create a written action plan which can be referred to, share it amongst the staff and students, put it onto the notice board at school and share the results with your parents and school community.
- Agree a date for your next Waste Audit so you can see how the school has improved!

Consider planning an assembly with your Eco-group to share what they have found to their peers and the Action Plan with the whole school!





Glossary of terms

Climate Action Plan: This is a non-statutory guidance given by the Department of Education that by 2025, all education settings in England will have put in place a climate action plan. This plan aims to increase your students and staff's confidence in climate education, prioritise sustainability, reduce operating costs and more. [Click here for more information about the Climate Action Plan.](#)

Climate Change: An umbrella term for the change of global weather patterns caused by higher levels of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases, from human activity. This means temperature and moisture levels are changing from the past 'normal'. For example, somewhere can become too wet from extreme rainfall in an intense storm, and then too dry from a prolonged drought. That is an example of a severe weather event, and these will become more frequent with climate change. In some areas and seasons, it might even be cooler than the past 'normal'.

Compost Caddy: The lidded bin that holds your food waste inside the education setting building.

Composting: The breakdown process of food materials into compost (aka fantastic soil).

Contamination: To render impure by contact or mixture. This can be food on the material, like leftover yogurt in its plastic pot, or a material in the wrong bin, for example, paper in the recycling bin for plastics.

Eco Team: A group of young people in your school who are passionate about environmental issues. The group meet regularly to plan and deliver environmental projects and inspire their schoolmates. The students would be supported by one or more adult Eco-Coordinators.

Energy from Waste or EfW: The process of generating electricity through treating waste. [Click here for our webpage for more information on EfW.](#)

Digital Spring Balance Scale: A scale with a hook and a handle, like a luggage scale, to weigh your bags of rubbish.

General Waste: Any waste that cannot be recycled. For example: used blue paper towels, stickers, sticky tape or polystyrene etc.

Global Warming: The long-term heating of the Earth's surface caused by human activity, primarily burning fossil fuels, trapping heat in the Earth's atmosphere. Global warming presents itself as only rising global temperatures. Therefore, this term is not interchangeable with the term "climate change".



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H&S: Stands for Health & Safety.

Landfill: Putting waste in a pit in the ground and letting it rot. [Click here for more information about Landfills.](#)

Materials: This is the item being recycled, such as, glass, metal, paper and plastic.

Non-recyclable: Materials that cannot be recycled and must be put in the general waste bin. For example, paper towels and stickers.

Recycle: Using as much of the material that would otherwise be going to waste to make new products.

Reduce: To bring down the amount of waste produced or the amount of stuff you buy. For example, reducing carrier bags by taking your own shopping bags to the supermarket. [Click here for more information about Reduce.](#)

Reuse: To use something over, and over again. For example, using a reusable water bottle or buying pre-loved clothes from charity shops or online platforms. [Click here for more information about Reuse.](#)

Sustainability Lead: A nominated person in your education setting to lead the climate action plan.

Waste Audit: The process of sorting your waste to find out what is and how much is being thrown away or recycled. This allows you to see what areas your school can improve, such as increasing your recycling rates.

Sources:

[What is climate change and why does it matter? | Natural History Museum](#)

[Sustainability leadership and climate action plans in education - GOV.UK](#)



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zone.recycledevon.org