



***“I want to bring sustainability to as many people as possible”***

Inspired to create a greener future and connect communities, Elly Obeney launched a plastic-free refill business

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LEFT Elly lives in Tunbridge Wells in Kent and sets up regularly at The Pantiles market there

BELOW Waste is minimised in all areas of her business, including the recycled paper labels



LEFT AND BELOW All products are vegan and cruelty-free. Simply bring a container, refill and repeat!



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When Elly Obeney realised the extent of the damage caused by plastic, she wanted to change the way she lived. 'I read lots of books and watched various documentaries. One of the common tips for cutting out plastic is to refill products, but there was nothing to facilitate that in my local area,' she remembers. Elly was especially moved by David Attenborough's work. 'I was shocked when I watched *Blue Planet*. It took a while to sink in and really had an impact on me. Everyone looks up to David Attenborough, and to hear him describe the damage plastic is doing to our oceans was a turning point for me.'

Now 27 years old, at the time, Elly was working in admin and accounting. 'If someone had said that this time next year I would be running my own business, I wouldn't have thought it was possible,' she says. But she began researching and knew it was now or never. 'A few months after having the idea, I handed in my notice. I felt impatient and just wanted to get going; it felt like the right time.'

'Lots of people told me not to quit my job and to keep it for security, but I wanted to give the business everything. It was scary and it felt crazy telling people why I was leaving,' she says. Elly's family was supportive, with her brother, Joe, creating her website and her boyfriend, Andrew, designing

her logo and branding. A few months later, Elly launched Contain Yourself – a refill station for toiletries and household cleaning products with the aim of reducing plastic waste. Elly buys in bulk so customers can refill bottles. She stocks everything from shampoo to washing-up liquid, Mooncups, soap and toothpaste at markets across Kent and East Sussex.

### Community connection

Although Elly initially wanted to launch a shop, it wasn't viable. 'I know now that markets are an important place to start and to learn. I enjoy the variety and can test things out to gauge reactions and popularity in different locations,' she says. It helps foster a sense of community. 'I think people like being at the market, seeing it happening and talking to other people who are interested in the same cause.'

It took time to establish the message of Elly's business. 'People didn't understand at first because they hadn't seen anything like it before. Some other stallholders were a bit dismissive but, when I kept going back, they began to understand it more. It feels really rewarding when someone hasn't been interested in going plastic-free but then turns up with their bottles to refill,' she says.

Elly works at different locations, with Mondays >>>

RIGHT Working at different markets has helped Elly to connect with local communities and bring sustainable options to people across Kent and East Sussex



*"If enough people can rethink the way that they shop, then it sends a message to the big companies. You can speak out with how and where you spend your money"*



RIGHT AND BELOW Elly enjoys upcycling, crafting and scouring second-hand shops for everything from clothes to jars for products on her stall



*"I strive to be honest and transparent and to raise awareness that there is no simple escape from plastic"*



>>> off. 'I thought I would struggle with not having a regular routine, but I love having more freedom. It's great that every day is different. I can't imagine going back to the nine-to-five after being so in control of what I do,' she says. The business was recently nominated for a Muddy Stiletto award. 'I'm really proud of having come this far. There was a point when it was a big risk and I could have lost lots of money. It would have been easy to say it wasn't right for me and quit.'

### Seeing is believing

The past year has transformed Elly's outlook. 'To watch the business growing is such a huge confidence boost – to see all these things happening that I thought I couldn't do. When it does feel overwhelming, I try to stop and think, "No... you've done this before. You can do it!" It has changed my mindset around what I can achieve. When people come to the market and say how amazing they think it is and recognise what I've done, it helps remind me. It's great to talk to other passionate people.'

Elly was 'naturally a shy person' but her passion for the environment has changed that. 'I didn't like putting myself

outside of my comfort zone, but this is my baby and I want to talk about it and tell people,' she says. 'Even just going to the different markets and driving to new places, that used to be quite a big deal for me, but I have overcome that, too. My passion for what I do overrides any of my other fears.' She has recently started giving educational and outreach talks about the dangers of plastic, including at a local school and a branch of the Women's Institute.

Helping to raise awareness is important to Elly. 'We need to change people's mindsets about how they shop and the products they're using,' she says. 'Any tiny change you make can make a big difference. If enough people can rethink the way they shop – by refilling or going to the farmers' market, for example – then it sends a message to the big companies. You can speak out with how and where you spend your money.'

Elly has taken part in beach cleans and saw the effect community action can have at a recent local event, Make Shoreham Shine. 'It was one of my favourite days so far for the business,' she says. The event brought together local people for a community clean-up, with Elly providing

refills. 'There was a real sense of community with everyone doing something to help. I plan to be more involved in eco group events – it's a nice way to bring people together and support them to actively go out and make a difference. It's heart-warming to know that there is a network that cares.'

At home, Elly lives minimally and enjoys upcycling. 'It's fun to experiment and be creative,' she says. She chooses to buy her clothes from charity and second-hand shops where possible.

### Homemade is where the heart is

Some of her upcycled creations include washable face wipes, pompoms and yarn made from old clothes, which can be transformed into rugs or cushions. She has also crafted homemade soy wax and charcoal mascara, body butter and lip balm. 'I'd like to branch out to make more and one day sell my homemade products,' she says. 'I try to take natural steps – if a bottle runs out, then refill it; if your clothes break, then repair rather than replace them. It's a gradual process.'

Being in the kitchen helps Elly switch off. 'I like being inventive with cooking,' she says. 'As someone who has

recently become vegetarian, I enjoy learning to cook new things. I try not to buy anything ready-made and choose fresh ingredients, so that I have to make something. It has made me more creative with flavours and I've noticed that I also feel healthier.'

Living and working in line with her values motivates Elly. 'I strive to be honest and transparent and to raise awareness that there is no simple escape from plastic,' she says. 'I try to make the best environmentally friendly decisions I can; I choose only to sell products that are vegan, natural, have no chemicals and are cruelty-free. There might be cheaper ways of doing things if I cut out some of those values, but they are important to me. I want to bring sustainability to as many people as I possibly can.'

What does that look like in the future? 'The goal eventually is to be easily accessible to as many people as possible. I'd love a shop where I can sell refills and also make my own products. Branches across the country one day would be the dream!'

**Find Elly and Contain Yourself** at markets and events across Kent and East Sussex. See [containyourselfw.com](http://containyourselfw.com) for a calendar. Follow @containyourself\_tunbridgewells on Instagram. Elly also offers delivery to your home and refill parties