

How to Reduce Food Waste at Conferences and Events

A practical guide for London event organisers

The scale of the problem in UK events

The UK throws away 9.5 million tonnes of food a year, according to WRAP's most recent Food Surplus and Waste in the UK report. Around 1.1 million tonnes of that comes from the hospitality and food service sector — restaurants, hotels, contract catering, and event venues combined. Some 75% of that hospitality waste is edible when it reaches the bin: bread trims, portion overspill, buffet leftovers that no one touched, plated food returned uneaten.

Events are a specific pressure point. Guest numbers are pinned down weeks ahead and then drift on the day; catering is ordered against best-guess RSVPs plus a safety margin; and buffets — the format most conferences default to — generate more plate waste per head than plated service, because portion size is decided by the guest rather than the kitchen. A day-long conference for 200 delegates typically produces 20–30kg of food waste before anyone lifts a bin bag.

Where the waste actually comes from

Three sources dominate:

- **Over-ordering.** Caterers historically size for +10% on confirmed numbers to insulate against complaints. Compound that across breakfast, lunch, breaks and dinner and the safety margin becomes the biggest single line of waste.
- **Plate waste.** Buffets in particular. Guests take a bit of everything, then leave half of it. Plated service and bowl food both cut plate waste substantially versus a buffet — plated because the kitchen sizes the portion, bowl food because guests self-select smaller amounts and can come back for more.
- **Untouched surplus.** Whole platters that never get put out, or that come off the pass at the end of a break because footfall was lower than expected. This is the most recoverable category — the food is safe, unserved, and can be donated or redirected.

How to plan a low-waste event

Before the day

Get the RSVP list as precise as you reasonably can, and split it by session — the same 200 delegates rarely all show for the 8:30am breakfast. Confirm dietary requirements at booking, not on arrival, so the kitchen orders against real numbers rather than percentages. If you're using an external caterer, ask them to prepare against confirmed dietaries rather than assuming a 20% vegetarian/vegan buffer.

Where you have the choice, favour formats that push portion decisions to the kitchen: bowl food, plated service, canapés, or chef-carved stations rather than open buffets. If a buffet is right for the event, ask the caterer to plate the first pass — set the portion, refill only when needed — rather than laying everything out at once.

Menu design

Simple menus waste less. Every additional dish is another line of over-ordering. Seasonal menus waste less

because ingredients are cheaper and easier to redirect. Menus that use whole ingredients well — roast chicken with the bones going into stock, root vegetables where the tops become pesto — waste less than menus built around trimmed prime cuts.

Cavendish's catering partner, Mayfair Catering, is a WRAP Food Waste Roadmap signatory — a public commitment to halving food waste by 2030 against a 2015 baseline. In practice that shapes menu design, portion sizing and supplier choice.

On the day

Stagger service. Putting the whole break out at once maximises visual impact and maximises what ends up in the bin. Refresh in waves against actual footfall. Empower the kitchen to hold back trays if attendance is below the expected number for that session.

Cavendish's approach

All catering across the five Cavendish venues is prepared in-house. In-house has one big food-waste advantage over external catering: the kitchen sees the whole day, adjusts service in real time, and reuses surplus into the next meal service (a breakfast pastry becomes tomorrow's bread pudding) rather than sending it out the door in an insulated box that no one will re-open.

Standard dietary options — vegan, vegetarian, gluten-free, halal, kosher — are included, not bolted on. That reduces separate "special" orders that often go untouched.

Food waste that can't be redirected goes to anaerobic digestion rather than landfill. Anaerobic digestion breaks food waste down into biogas (which becomes electricity or gas) and digestate (which becomes fertiliser). It is not the same as composting: composting takes months and produces mostly soil conditioner; anaerobic digestion runs to days and produces energy plus fertiliser. For an urban venue with no space to compost, it's the cleanest route available.

Cavendish holds B Corp certification — the only dedicated London conference venue operator to do so — which independently verifies that waste, sourcing and energy standards actually match what the marketing says.

After the event: donation and diversion

Genuinely surplus food that never left the kitchen can go to good use rather than the bin. Three routes work well for events in London:

- **City Harvest London** collects surplus from restaurants, caterers and events and delivers it the same day to charities feeding people. Booking a collection ahead of a large event is straightforward and free.
- **FoodCycle** runs community meal projects across the UK using surplus food; they can take packaged, tinned or long-life items rather than open plates.
- **Bio Collectors** is a South London commercial food-waste service that runs the food through anaerobic digestion — the route Cavendish uses.

Health and safety rules limit what can be donated: open buffet dishes that have been out at ambient temperature typically can't be given away, but sealed items, whole platters that never left the kitchen, and packaged snacks all can. Talk to your caterer at the planning stage — a decision made on the day is a decision made too late.

Measuring what you cut

The number that matters is kilograms of food to landfill per delegate per day. A well-run conference in 2026 should be under 100g/delegate/day of unavoidable waste (biological trim, plate scrapings that can't be

donated). Above 200g is a signal that portion sizes are wrong or the format is wrong. Ask your caterer to weigh the bin at the end of the event and share the number back — most won't unless you ask, and asking changes what gets ordered next time.

Frequently asked questions

Do you cater vegan and vegetarian menus as standard?

Yes. Vegan, vegetarian, gluten-free, halal and kosher are all standard options across every Cavendish menu, at no premium and with no separate lead time.

Can we donate surplus food from our event?

Yes, subject to what's safe to donate. Sealed items, untouched packaged food and platters that haven't gone out can go to City Harvest, FoodCycle or a similar service — we'll arrange the collection if you tell us at the planning stage. Open buffet dishes that have been out at temperature can't be donated for safety reasons; they go to anaerobic digestion.

What happens to food waste that can't be donated?

All food waste across the Cavendish venues goes to anaerobic digestion rather than landfill. The AD plant produces biogas and fertiliser rather than landfill methane.

How do you size portions to avoid over-catering?

We order against confirmed guest numbers and confirmed dietary requirements, not a percentage buffer. If you can get us your final numbers 72 hours before the event, we can size the kitchen accordingly. Formats like bowl food, plated service and chef stations let us match portion to appetite rather than to guesswork.

Is Cavendish's sustainability claim independently verified?

Yes. Cavendish Venues is a Certified B Corporation, which requires an independent audit of environmental, social and governance practices covering everything from waste management to supplier relationships. Certification is renewed every three years against tightening standards.