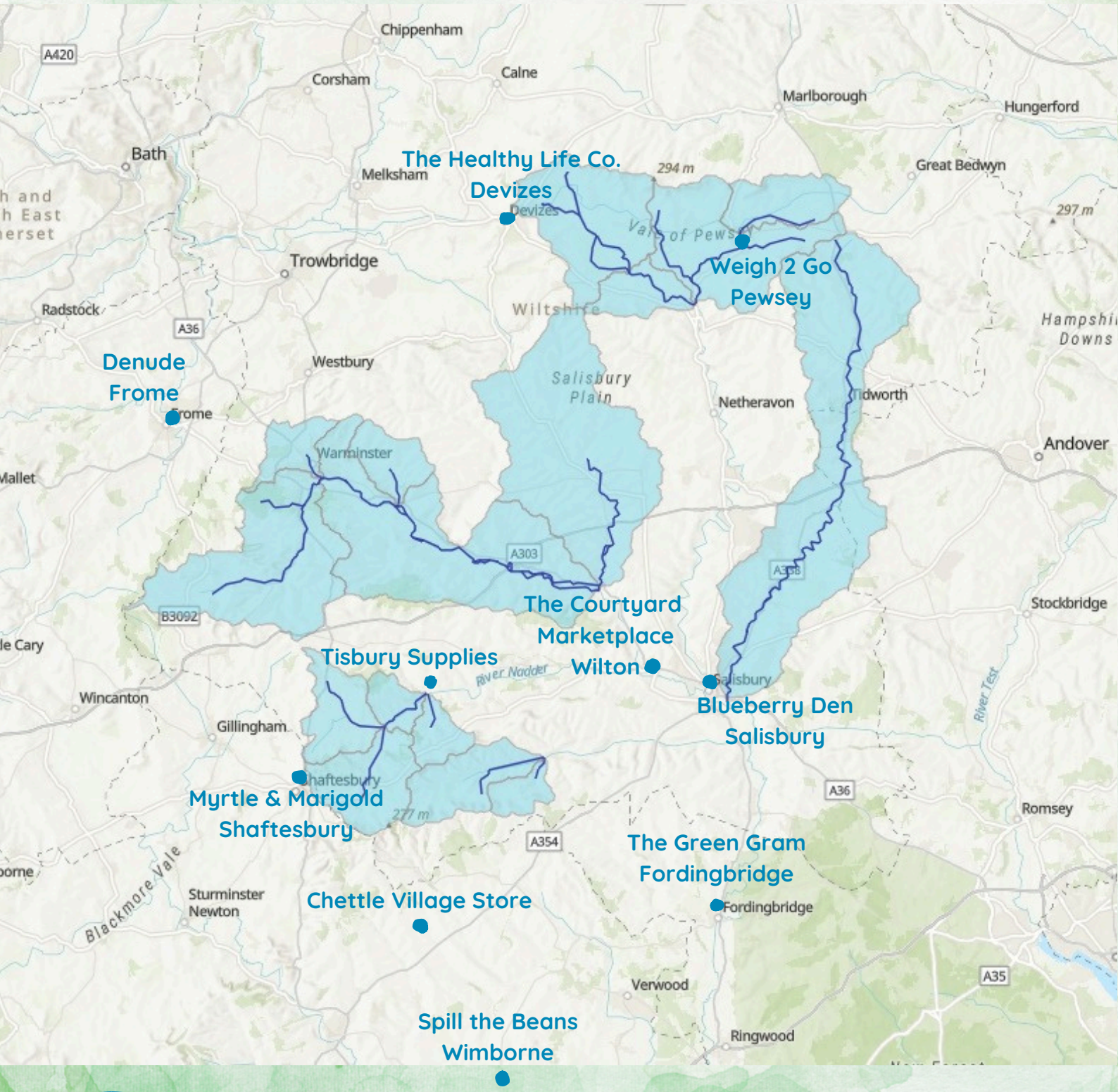


Zero Waste and Refill Shops



Wessex
Rivers Trust

www.wessexrt.org.uk

What's the problem?

The environmental impact of millions of us buying new products, in new packaging has been recognised for a long time, and zero waste and refill shops offer a solution to both plastic waste and food or product waste, in that you can buy in just the amounts you need. They also tend to offer items that are kinder to the planet and to ourselves. Increasingly we are gaining a greater understanding of the impact on river health, of all the chemicals in cleaning, and self care products going down our drains. So if you haven't already discovered the joys of zero waste shopping, read on to find out what it's all about in a bit more depth.

I've been slowly switching to eco friendly personal care and cleaning products for years now. It's been a gradual journey, with twists and turns... and my cupboards still aren't totally river friendly – but I'm a lot more conscious about what I buy these days.

A mix of things nudged me along: caring about the environment (and my own health) top the list, but recommendations from friends and family, tempting brand offers, social media buzz, and the odd news article have all played their part too. And of course, there's the trial and error bit – figuring out which products actually work, smell good, or indeed have no added scents, and feel worth the money.

I buy mostly in person, with the odd thing purchased online, and for me, getting to know my local eco and refill shops has been a huge part of the process. In this article, I'll be chatting with some of the businesses across Wessex about their best selling swaps, their tips for easing into greener choices, and why becoming a little more river friendly is a step worth taking.

“Motivation is what gets you started, habit is what keeps you going” - Jim Rohn

My hope is that through straightforward information around the harms of household chemicals, and reporting of the facts, more people will be motivated to become river friendly in their consumer choices. This article aims to tap into how you might make your choices into a sustainable habit that fits in with your life and improves not only the health and wellbeing of you and your family, but also the aquatic life of your local rivers. I've asked those who know the business best, to share their top tips and hero products in the world of eco-friendly living.



Joe at Spill The Beans

What's selling and why?

Joe runs the family business **Spill the Beans** in Wimborne, initially set up by his parents selling health foods. The shop, which turns 50 this year, has always been ahead of the curve when it comes to being environmentally friendly. It's a kind of eco-supermarket with an excellent range of whole foods, health supplements, eco-cleaning and personal care options – and a whole wall of different tea options to explore too!

Joe, who now has a young family of his own, said:

“We like to think we sell everything, there’s about 2,500 products in here so there’s a lot of choice, and a lot of knowledge too.”

If there’s something you want and you can’t find it, Joe is likely to find you something similar on the shelves or order it in directly for you, meaning you can build up a positive and personal relationship with the shop, which worked the same way in most of the shops I visited.

When talking about the refill section, Joe adds:

“We run a personal service here, where the staff serve for you and you don’t have to worry about spilling your bottles or making a mess. Some people even drop off the bottles and go for a coffee.”

It’s not the only shop that refills for you as a standard. The Green Gram in Fordingbridge, run almost entirely by volunteers, operates in the same way, with many of the other shops offering self-service but with very friendly staff on hand to fill up your bottles for you if you prefer.

In the heart of Salisbury, Celeste runs the small and beautifully curated **Blueberry Den**, which she opened about four and a half years ago. With limited space, Celeste focuses on stocking essentials rather than luxury items, although shopping there will feel like a treat, with everything laid out in an eye-catching way and a range of gorgeous smells mingling in the air.

“I just wanted to create a one stop shop for people to get essentials, and everything they need but without too many overwhelming choices.”



Blueberry Den run by Celeste

Celeste offers a basic range of food and spice refills, as well as liquid cleaning items and personal care, and aims to offer simple, straightforward swaps that are good for the environment and don’t impact your wallet too much. She stocks many of the essentials for natural cleaning – such as baking soda and white vinegar – inspired in part by the work of Nancy Birtwhistle, and has even been running her own natural cleaning workshops within the community.

When you step into **The Green Gram** in Fordingbridge, the first thing you notice is the lively, welcoming atmosphere created by both the friendly staff and the steady stream of customers. The shop is a community-owned, not-for-profit venture, run largely by dedicated volunteers. Local people have been at the centre of its success, contributing not only their time but also their support by buying low-cost shares in the shop, meaning they are totally invested in its success.



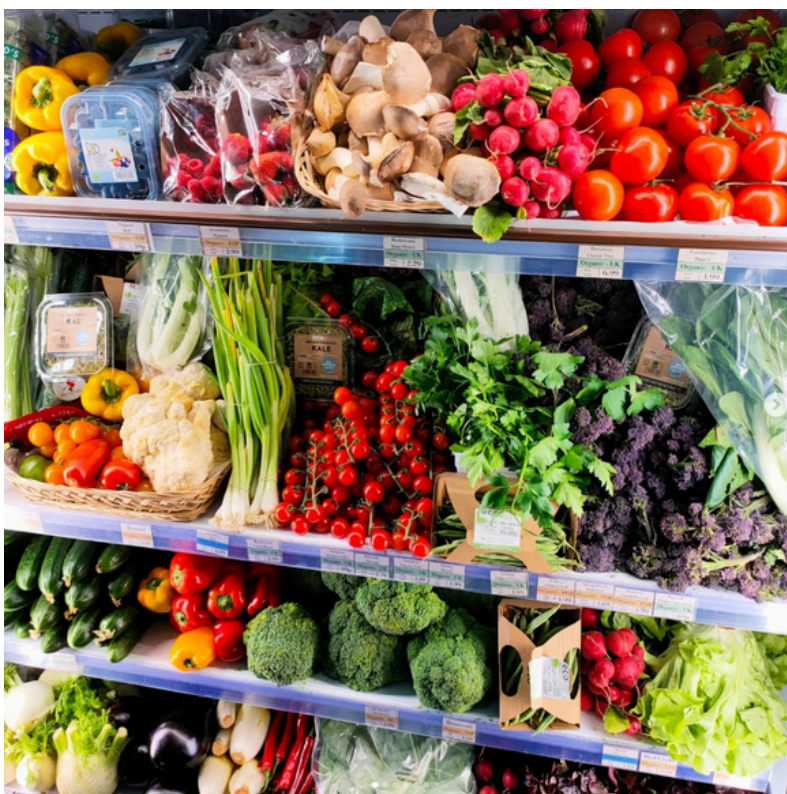
Volunteers at The Green Gram

As the shop manager Jo told me:

“The beauty of refill shops is that you can buy just a small amount to try, and test things out before committing to a big bottle of something.”



Further West in the heart of rural North Dorset, Alice runs the **Chettle Village Store**, a “mini-supermarket that actually stands for something” specialising in local, organic, ethical food, drink and household staples. Famous for its hot pies, the shop now also offers great coffee, locally baked bread and cakes, organic veg, local meat and seafood, ice creams, a seating area, second-hand clothes and bric-a-brac.



“We always try to hold one affordable product and one ethical product so that everyone has a choice. I don’t want to become an evangelical, high-end shop that scares customers away – everyone is on a journey and I want to be able to cater for all parts of that journey.”

Chettle Village Store

Reality (challenges)

Starting small is a theme echoed by many shop owners. Joe strongly suggested taking it one step at a time if you'd like to become more environmentally conscious in your consumer choices — giving one product a go and letting that change settle in before overwhelming yourself. Hand soap or washing-up liquid is often where people start.

We discussed the scary warnings on the back of many washing-up liquid bottles — **“harmful to the aquatic environment with long lasting effect”**. Joe pointed out that:

“Some big washing up liquid companies have made a fortune out of convincing people that washing up liquid has to be bubbly... bubbles don't clean anything.”

Many eco products don't bubble as much, particularly in our hard water areas, but it doesn't make any difference at all to how well they clean.

Again, it comes back to habit and what you're used to. Once the change is established, you stop noticing the difference — and instead you might begin to notice how harsh conventional products can be. Looking at the data sheet for a leading brand of washing-up liquid, it recommended avoiding contact with skin, wearing gloves and eye protection, storing away from children, and contacting a doctor or poison centre if it came into contact with eyes. All of this before considering the impact on aquatic life as these chemicals are washed into rivers from thousands of households every day.



Refills in Myrtle & Marigold

From a business perspective, refilling is still a long way off from being mainstream. At the moment, it feels difficult for refills to be financially sustainable as a standalone offer. Most business owners rely on other areas of sales — such as food, homeware, or an attached café — to stay viable. Refills often work best as an added extra rather than the main reason people visit.

What you can do

The simple fact is that over the years we've been sold countless products, marketed to solve every possible problem, each one bottled up and filled with a long list of chemical ingredients. But is there another way — one that reduces harm to our waterways, saves plastic, and costs less too?

Celeste's journey began with concerns about plastic pollution. Her suppliers operate closed-loop systems, returning large plastic containers to be refilled and reused. One UK brand alone estimates it has saved millions of plastic bottles from landfill.

If it's something you want to try, there are easy ways to start. Take a jam jar or bottle and buy a small amount to try. Swap one product at a time. Don't aim for perfection.

As the often-quoted saying goes: **“We don't need a handful of people doing zero waste perfectly — we need millions of people doing it imperfectly.”**

Refilling isn't a mainstream habit yet, but as more people embrace it, costs should come down and many of today's barriers will naturally ease. For now, it can feel difficult for refills to be financially sustainable as a standalone offer, with most business owners relying on other areas of sales – such as food, homeware, or an attached café – to stay viable. In many cases, refills work best as an added extra rather than the main draw.

The challenges are real, but with small, imperfect steps, supportive local businesses, and a growing appetite for change, I'm hopeful the tide will turn – making river-friendly, low-waste living an easier and more everyday choice for more people.



1. Start small doing a little is better than nothing

2. Get some help, apps like Yukka help to identify harmful ingredients




3. Get to know your nearest refill centre or eco shop and ask them their recommendations

Next Steps:



Make it personal - find out which river catchment you are in, and in what the health of your local river is here: [**Explore Catchment Data**](#)

 Follow @riverfriendlyliving on Instagram, and visit our project hub: [Our Healthy Headwaters](#)

 Check your washing up liquid label and look for any warning symbols, tell a friend and check theirs too!

I spoke to....

Joe at Spill the Beans @spillthebeanswimb

Celeste at Blueberry Den @blueberry.den

Becky at Myrtle & Marigold @myrtleandmarigoldshaftesbury

Nigel at Tisbury Supplies

Andy at The Courtyard Marketplace @thecourtyard16

Jo at The Green Gram @thegreengramrefills

Alice at The Chettle Village Store @chettle_village_store

Sophie at Denude @_denude

