



Sainsbury's

MARKS &
SPENCER

TESCO

PLASTIC CARRIER BAG SURVEY AUGUST 2003

BACKGROUND

1. In County Durham, it is estimated that almost 65 million plastic carrier bags enter the waste stream every year, most of them ending up in landfill sites. Some litter the countryside. The carrier bags are produced using finite resources. They take, perhaps, 100 years to degrade.
2. Nationally, according to Government figures, it is estimated that each household uses the equivalent of 323 bags per year. The average life of a single give away carrier bag has been estimated as only three minutes before being discarded.
3. In an attempt to address this issue, following the initial success of the Irish tax on plastic bags, in November 2002, Durham County Council's Environment Scrutiny Sub-Committee investigated the potential of piloting a bag levy within the County Durham area. Opinion polls were conducted via the Northern Echo newspaper and the regional BBC to gauge the public's response to such taxation. 77% of those who took part within the polls stated that they would welcome taxation on plastic bags locally. The debate was heightened both locally and nationally via the media.
4. A Parliamentary Question was put forward by Kevan Jones MP seeking the Government's current thinking on this topic. In March 2003, a response was received from Central Government stating that they had no plans to introduce a tax on plastic bags. However they were in favour of, and supported, more environmentally-friendly solutions to this form of packaging.

5. The plastic bag debate instigated considerable interest amongst the public and the plastics industry. Support was received from the British Retail Consortium to work with a number of their members to try and find alternative solutions.
6. Since the plastic bag taxation was not universally accepted by all, but there was a feeling of “something should be done”, work to educate and influence the customers’ buying habits began. In March 2003, an invitation was sent to all major retailers within the Durham City area to attend a meeting to investigate the options relating to plastic bag alternatives.
7. The Government suggested that voluntary solutions would be more beneficial than a fiscal approach. This would require an approach to seek to change customer practice.

THE PLASTIC CARRIER BAG CAMPAIGN – RAISING AWARENESS

8. To assess whether a voluntary approach could be successful, it was decided a survey would be carried out over a period of a month in large retail outlets in the Durham City area of County Durham.
9. Tesco and Sainsburys locally supported this initiative and a decision was made to work with these retailers in an attempt to raise the public’s awareness of this issue. The key areas which needed to be pursued were that of their own staff training and promotion. Initiatives to promote re-useable bags, Bags for Life and biodegradable bags were options which were to be investigated. It was agreed that the critical issue was to offer the customer a choice and that a range of options would be appropriate. Following the initial publicity to the campaign, Marks and Spencer’s were keen to be involved.
10. During the month of August, the campaign working with the local supermarkets was instigated. A local school was contacted to participate in a competition to design an eco-logo which was printed on to a jute bag. The winning design was used as a promotional tool for waste awareness and waste education (jute was chosen as it is a natural alternative to plastic). The jute bags were distributed free of charge via a series of waste awareness roadshows, which took place countywide between 2nd-9th August 2003.
11. Promotional posters were also placed in and around the supermarkets to encourage people at the point of sale to think about minimising the use of bags and purchasing a re-usable bag or a bag for life.
12. During this period, the “Investing in Children” group surveyed the public’s attitudes to the use of plastic bags. Information leaflets were also provided to the public to inform them of the purpose of the plastic bag campaign.

13. Each individual store was asked to monitor their sales of standard carrier bags and Bags for Life.

CAMPAIGN RESULTS

14. **Supermarket Results:**

a. Tesco

Tesco have plans to introduce degradable bags in all their stores in the near future. As a result of this local initiative, they “previewed” their introduction at their Durham store. This clearly represents major progress in reducing the consumption of standard plastic carrier bags. Another interesting development was that the sale of 'Bags for Life' also increased by 80% during the period of the survey.

b. Sainsburys

Again, as a result of this initiative, Sainsburys introduced a degradable bag at their Durham store. Interestingly, not only did this remove totally the number of standard carrier bags issued, there was a significant reduction in the number of degradable bags consumed – a reduction of 30%. The main reason for this decrease was attributed to an increased awareness caused by the publicity for Sainsburys' 'Penny Back' scheme where a penny is donated to charity for each carrier bag re-used. This increased by 10% during the trial period.

Over the course of the trial period sales of Bags for Life also increased by approximately 500%. This clearly was a most satisfactory outcome.

c. Marks and Spencer

As a general retailer, selling more non-food than food products, mainly in town centre locations, Marks and Spencer have found that a 'bag for life' approach does not work well for their type of retailing. Whilst they have offered a number of re-usable bag for life type bags for several years, they were enthusiastic to be part of this initiative by launching a new range of shopping bags in the North East. These differed from alternatives, being of a high quality woven fabric construction with a long usable life.

The participating store was in the centre of Durham City which provided a contrast to the out of town locations of the two other supermarkets involved.

The trial was very successful and, as a result, in the beginning of October, all Marks and Spencer food sections now offer these

bags. However, given the number of stores and time involved, it has not been possible to identify reductions in disposable carrier bag usage. Additionally, during October, Marks and Spencer are trialling Biodegradable carrier bags manufactured from non-GM corn starch and vegetable oils.

15. **Investing in Children: Customer Questionnaire**

As part of the survey, Investing in Children undertook two customer survey questionnaires at the Sainsburys and Tesco stores involved in this initiative. 96 responses were obtained at Sainsburys and 73 at Tesco.

16. The survey was carried out separately for males and females. The gender information was broadly similar. It is clear that the majority of people surveyed did re-use their plastic carrier bags. Most were used for lining their waste paper bins. Only about 10% re-used them for shopping.
17. Just over half of the people surveyed had heard of the Bags for Life scheme introduced by the supermarkets. There were significantly more females than males who were familiar with the schemes. Of those people who had heard of the scheme, roughly half of those had used the Bags for Life. The general view was that this was a positive initiative.
18. Some questions were asked about degradable carrier bags. There was a perception that the bags might not be as strong as normal plastic bags. Nevertheless, there was a significant preference for degradable carrier bags. Interestingly, very few people surveyed had realised that on the day of the survey, degradable bags were being issued.
19. A specific question was asked in relation to a tax on carrier bags. The majority of people surveyed indicated that if a 10p tax were introduced this would have a major impact on their use of carrier bags. Just under half the people surveyed said, they would re-use their carrier bags. Another 36% said they would use alternatives such as Bags for Life.
20. There was a very strong preference – 80% of those surveyed – who stated they preferred to shop in a store which was demonstrating it was trying to be environmentally friendly.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

21. This was a small survey over a limited period but, nevertheless, the results have been significant. Two major supermarkets have introduced degradable carrier bags as part of this initiative, another is now considering introducing degradable bags. This not only totally removes non-degradable carrier bags from the waste stream but also provides the potential to reduce the number of degradable bags issued

if thought is applied. Further, the evidence shows that the purchase of bags for life can also be significantly increased at the same time.

22. There seems to be no reason why, with co-ordination, this could not be achieved in many retail outlets over the whole of the County. If so, there is the potential to reduce the number of non-degradable plastic carrier bags going to landfill dramatically. This would have a significant impact on the environment and a noticeable effect on landfill tax in the County. Public opinion from the survey taken by Investing in Children would suggest that this is in line with the wishes of the public.
23. The initiative was relatively easy to introduce. The supermarkets and the Council have a broad, common interest in the reduction of standard carrier bags which are issued. The particular aim is to tackle the unnecessary distribution of carrier bags, ie those bags which are not degradable and find their way quickly to landfill.
24. Central government has indicated that they favour a voluntary solution to this issue. This small survey has indicated that a voluntary approach with a small degree of co-ordination and modest publicity can significantly reduce standard carrier bag consumption. To an extent, this can stimulate a change in attitude and behaviour which might have spin-off benefits for other waste minimisation initiatives.
25. One of the strengths of this survey was the combination of school involvement, Investing in Children, the private sector and local government. The initiative has stimulated debate about environmental issues and created interest from other local authorities and interested parties throughout the country.
26. This encouraging outcome suggests that the Council should
 - consider broadening this initiative with the aim of promoting environmentally friendly carrier bags throughout the whole of the county and to the retail industry as a whole rather than just supermarkets.
 - promoting this approach as the model for a national campaign with the assistance of Kevan Jones, MP, and the British Retail Consortium.