

Information/Discussion Paper

Environment Overview & Scrutiny Committee

18 January 2012

Update on general use of plastic bags

This note contains information to keep Members informed of matters relating to the work of the Committee, but where no decisions from Members are needed

1. Why has this come to scrutiny?

- 1.1 Environment Overview & Scrutiny Committee recently voiced concern about the continued use of plastic bags in Cheltenham and asked officers to provide an update on the issue.

2. Summary of the Issue

- 2.1 In December 2007, the council passed a motion to support and encourage retailers and businesses in the town to eliminate excessive packaging and in particular reduce the widespread use of plastic bags. A report was subsequently made to council in June 2008 about the work undertaken during the intervening period and to update members on progress.
- 2.2 This report looks at examples of legislation introduced and voluntary action taken elsewhere to reduce the use of plastic bags, a 2006 Environment Agency assessment report on plastic bags and also provides a snapshot of what is happening on the ground locally. It then suggests some courses of action for the Committee to consider should members wish to take up the promotion of this issue once again.

3. Legislation and voluntary action

- 3.1 There are a number of examples of legislation which have been introduced to reduce the use of plastic bags.
- 3.2 Ireland imposed a tax on plastic bags in 2002. Retailers are required to pass the cost of this tax onto the shopper and the number of plastic bags has plummeted, dropping from 27 per person a month to 2.
- 3.3 In October 2011, Wales introduced a charge of 5p on all plastic bags with a potential £5000 fine for non-compliance. Concern has been expressed about this legislation as it includes a complicated set of exemptions and it is not yet clear what the effect of this legislation has been.
- 3.4 In 2007, the residents of Modbury, Devon, took voluntary action and banned plastic bags from the village. This campaign was taken up nationally at the time by the Daily Mail, but the government has always shied away from imposing either a ban or a levy.
- 3.5 London's Mayor hopes to ban free plastic bags in London before the Olympic Games later this year.

4. Environment Agency assessment report

- 4.1 The Environment Agency undertook a study to assess the life cycle environmental impacts of the production, use and disposal of different carrier bags available in the UK in 2006. The report considered only the types of carriers available from supermarkets, not those given out by other high street retailers. The table below summarises some of the results and indicates the number of times a “bag for life” or a cotton bag need to be used to outweigh the lifecycle impacts of a single use carrier bag.

| Type of carrier | Single-use bag (no secondary use) | Single-use bag (40.3% reused as bin liners) | Single-use bag (100% reused as bin liners) | Single-use bag (used 3 times) |
|-----------------|-----------------------------------|---|--|-------------------------------|
| “bag for life” | 4 | 5 | 9 | 12 |
| Cotton bag | 131 | 173 | 327 | 393 |

- 4.2 The table shows that the reuse of single-use bags is crucial to their environmental performance. The study also concluded that reuse, even as bin liners, produces greater benefits than simply recycling these bags.
- 4.3 However, this study did not take account of the littering caused by plastic bag use. This results in a different set of problems including the cleanliness of the local environment and the damaging effect on wildlife in the countryside and in the sea, which supports the argument for reducing plastic bag use overall.
- 4.4 Biodegradable plastic bags are also now available as an alternative, but there has been much discussion about how effective they are and, as is demonstrated above, efforts are better focused on reducing the use of plastic bags in the first place, then encouraging reuse, rather than on promoting a bag that simply degrades faster when it is thrown away.

5. The local context

- 5.1 Since the council report of 2008 the culture surrounding single use plastic bags has changed. Nationally, in 2006, nearly 11bn single use carriers bags were used. This fell to under 6.5bn by 2009-10. Although this figure then rose again to 6.8bn in 2010 this still represents a reduction of around 38% (*Source: The Guardian, 28 July 2011*).
- 5.2 From observation locally, it is reasonably clear that a greater proportion of the public now make use of re-usable bags, particularly for food shopping, than could be said a few years ago. The manager of Cheltenham Business Partnership, Martin Quantock, has indicated that the retail trade is also working hard to reduce the distribution of bags. This is based on his own experience as a branch manager of a national retail chain and discussions with a number of local retail managers. It is in the retailer’s best interests to do this as significant cost savings can be achieved. Having canvassed retailers in the town centre, Mr Quantock has also been able to report that the majority either impose a charge for a plastic bag or ask their customers if one is needed.
- 5.3 In terms of the council’s own services the Tourist Information Centre, which probably hands out the most bags, now only has brown paper bags and recycled paper carrier bags to hand out to customers. It also sells cotton bags with a Cheltenham logo on the side. Plastic polylopes are still used for sending out brochures, but none have been ordered for several years and the ones being used are what is left of a previous order. There are no plans to order any more.

6. Conclusion

- 6.1 In the absence of national legislation, the emphasis remains on encouraging retailers to restrict the availability of plastic bags and encouraging consumers to reduce their use of them.
- 6.2 Taking voluntary action locally to ban plastic bags is difficult, due to the abundance of national chains in the town, and local evidence suggests that it is actually consumer choice which is driving plastic bag use rather than retailers giving bags away freely. Any action, therefore, is probably better focused on consumers rather than retailers. The question is whether the council is best placed to influence the community on this issue and whether this would be of sufficient value to make the staff time and financial resources available.

7. Next steps

7.1 If the Committee is of the view that this issue warrants further work, there are different courses of action which could be taken.

- (i) The Committee could ask the Cheltenham Business Partnership manager to raise the issue at a partnership meeting to explore whether retailers could do any more to discourage their customers from accepting plastic bags or to encourage those who do take plastic bags away to reuse them in other ways.
- (ii) The Committee may wish to put forward one of the following options to the new scrutiny function, for consideration as a task and finish exercise:
- Running a direct promotional campaign aimed specifically at consumers
 - Linking up with a local voluntary group (subject to interest) to deliver a campaign

However, members will need to consider whether the outcomes are likely to be of sufficient value to warrant the investment in both staff time and financial resources, both of which will need to be identified.

- (iii) The Committee could invite The Echo to run a story or a campaign to get the message across to consumers.

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| Background Papers | Council report, 30 June 2008 |
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| Scrutiny Function | Environment Overview & Scrutiny Committee |