



# **MARKETING AND PROMOTION OF PLASTIC BAG ALTERNATIVES IN THE UNITED KINGDOM**

**Consumer, Commercial and Political  
Engagement**

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The following report provides an analysis of consumer, commercial and political engagement strategies for the marketing and promotion of plastic bag alternatives in the United Kingdom. Through examination of existing literature as well as questionnaire and interview data, the document gives a contextual understanding of consumer, commercial and political opinions regarding plastic bag use in the UK, and evaluates both pre-existing and potential future strategies for change.

The report can be summarised in three parts; first, the major concerns for key stakeholders are identified and discussed, based on questionnaire data, interview data and pre-existing literature. Given their importance in the plastic bag debate, the report mainly focusses on consumers and business owners, although it is important to note that other key stakeholders, such as suppliers and disposal units, may also have a part to play. For consumers, the report identifies personal attitudes and habitual behaviours as the major concern, followed by practical issues, environmental issues and design aspects. For business owners, on the other hand, key concerns include the accessibility of plastic alternatives, business image, legal issues and environmental factors.

Second, the report summarises both existing and potential marketing strategies for the promotion and sale of reusable bags in the UK. Existing marketing schemes are evaluated in terms of their success, with consumer and business owner concerns kept in mind. Current strategies used in the UK mainly consist of replacement and incentive schemes. While popular, the success of these schemes appears dependent upon the magnitude of the consumer's perceived reward as well as the amount of effort required to achieve that reward. Subscription rewards and sponsored advertisement are also discussed as a potential future avenue for exploration.

Third, the document examines the current status of political will in the United Kingdom (UK) towards legislation aimed at regulating the use of plastic bags. It finds that, due to a number of factors, political will in the UK has risen over the past several years, and future political movements are likely to be centred on educational and informational campaigns. Community ownership over environmental campaigns is also discussed, as well as consensus building as a means for dispute resolution.

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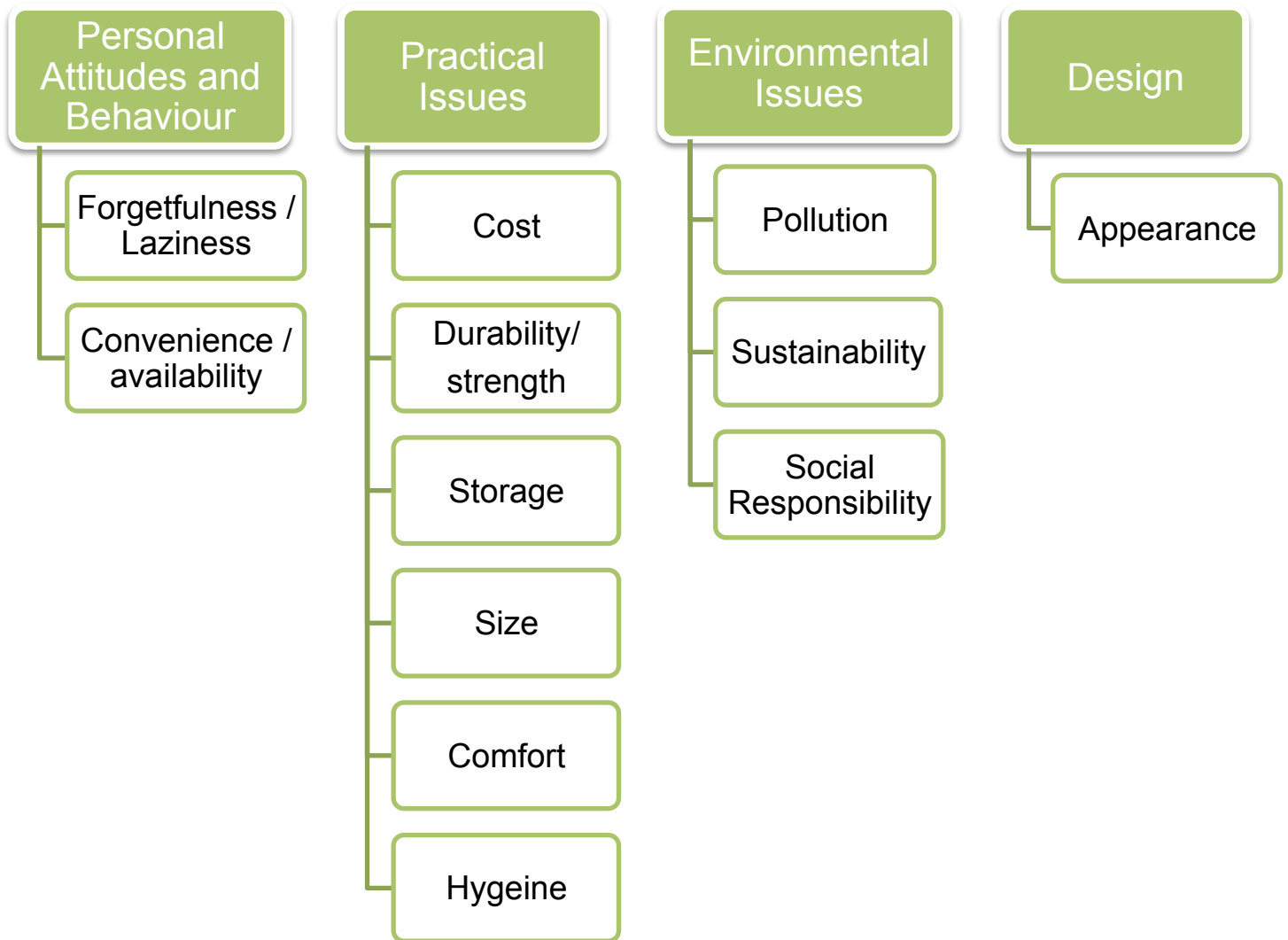
## 1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the humble plastic shopping bag has been the subject of increasing public concern, with its production and disposal contributing to global issues of waste, conservation and sustainability. After an environmental directive issued by the European Union, the British government followed in the footsteps of Wales and Scotland in implementing a 5 pence levy for single-use plastic carrier bags across England. Despite this, however, English shoppers still use an estimated one billion plastic bags per year.

The current report explores the attitudes and opinions of various stakeholders in the plastic bag debate, and reviews existing and potential strategies for reducing their usage. Given their significance, the report mainly focusses on the opinions and attitudes of consumers, business owners and political figures. However, other key stakeholders include those involved in the manufacturing and supply of plastic bags, as well as those involved in their disposal and recycling.

## 2. STAKEHOLDER OPINIONS

### 2.1 Consumer Concerns




Questionnaires (appendix A) were administered to seventeen participants selected via opportunity sampling around Birmingham City Centre. Participants ranged between the ages of 18-70, and 47% were male, 47% female, and 6% checked “prefer not to say.” Questionnaires asked participants about their typical bag use, as well as about their opinions on plastic, paper and reusable bags. To obtain more detailed answers, six participants were also interviewed, using the questions shown in Appendix B. Questionnaire and interview answers were reviewed alongside previous literature to identify four main consumer concerns: personal attitudes, practical issues, environmental issues, and design aspects. These four themes are explored in more detail below.

### 2.1.1 Personal Attitudes and Behaviour

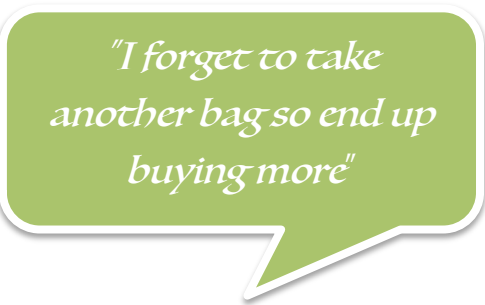
Most, if not all, questionnaire participants highlighted their own personal attitudes as a core motive for using single-use plastic bags and as a key barrier preventing them from using reusable bags. Generally, these attitudes were perceived as negative character traits, which were habitual, entrenched, and difficult for participants to overcome.

For instance, many participants expressed concern over their own forgetfulness or laziness; of those who used reusable bags on a regular basis, 57% said they often forgot to take their bags with them to the shop. A further 63% cited their own forgetfulness as a key reason for *not* using reusable bags. These findings have been replicated in previous research. In a 2014 survey completed by the Waste and Resources Action Program (WRAP), over 50% of 1538 UK citizens said that the primary reason they do not use reusable bags was because they often forgot them at home.

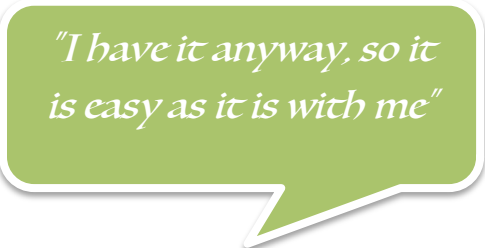
Of the two participants who had tried and failed to reduce their plastic bag usage, both cited forgetfulness as the dominant reason behind their failure. Participants found that, after forgetting their bags at home, they would simply buy more from the shop, thus reducing the bag's cost effectiveness. On the other hand, those who had succeeded in reducing their plastic bag use identified methods for overcoming their forgetfulness as the driving factor behind their success. Many participants chose to keep reusable bags on their person at all times, either in the boot of their car or, for women, in their purse or handbag (25%).



*"I always keep plastic bags with the aim of reusing them but then end up buying new ones when I'm out and don't have a bag on"*



*"I forget to take another bag so end up buying more"*



*"I have it anyway, so it is easy as it is with me"*

Throughout the questionnaires, the idea of convenience also appeared frequently. Of those who claimed to take new plastic bags from the till every time they go shopping, all cited convenience as their key reason for doing so. Interestingly, those who claimed to use reusable bags frequently *also* cited convenience as a key motivating factor – from their perspective, it was more convenient to use the bags they already had at home, than to take new ones from the till. Again, in the survey conducted by WRAP, 17% of all participants identified convenience as a key reason they did not take their own bags. Here, this response was more likely to be given by younger respondents, particularly men aged 18-44 and women aged 18-24. These differences

were not replicated in our own questionnaire, but this may be related to our small sample size.

### 2.1.2 Practical Issues

Second to personal attitudes, consumers often identified practical issues as a key concern when choosing between plastic and reusable bags.

Most commonly, consumers recognized cost as a key determining factor; while some questionnaire participants (7%) claimed that reusable cloth bags were generally too expensive, others agreed that reusable bags were more cost effective since they did not have to pay 5p each time they used the bag. Along a similar vein, consumers who preferred paper bags to plastic often did so because they did not have to pay a charge for using one (23%). Three participants believed that reducing plastic bag usage was good for the economy as a whole.

*"[Bags for life are] environmentally friendly and cheaper"*

*"I've already got lots of them [bags for life] and others cost 5p"*

Strength and durability of a bag also seemed to affect participant's decision. Often, participants used reusable bags because they were stronger and more durable (8%), and many did not think paper was a good alternative to plastic, because it tore too easily.

*"[Bags for life are] stronger when carrying heavy items compared to ordinary"*

*"I'd buy more reusable bags if they were cheaper and stronger"*

*"They [paper bags] may break easily, especially if it's raining"*

*"They rip and aren't as sturdy if they get wet"*

Some consumers preferred reusable bags over plastic ones because they believed they believed it saved them from storing excessive amounts of plastic bags. Indeed, many consumers admitted that when they had finished using plastic bags they often kept them stored out "just in case" rather than because they had any particular

need for them (82%). Similar findings were found in focus group research conducted by WRAP; here, plastic bags were stored and hoarded as a “force of habit” and not out of necessity. Conversely, some participants claimed that certain reusable bags, such as bags for life, were too bulky to be stored conveniently after use. This answer was frequent throughout both the questionnaires and interviews.

Comfort was also considered by several participants; they stated that sometimes, the bags they use were awkward to carry and would be more likely to use a reusable bag if they were more comfortable.

Hygiene was not a key factor highlighted in the questionnaire and so does not seem to be something consumers actively consider when choosing a particular bag. However, recent studies do show that reusable bags could be damaging our health. A study from the University of Arizona and Loma Linda University showed that nearly all (97%) of shoppers who use reusable bags do not regularly clean them. Furthermore, most freely mix uncooked meats, vegetables, and other foods in the same bag, creating the potential for cross-contamination. Half of the bags that researchers examined tested positive for coliform bacteria, and 12 percent had E. coli bacteria. However, 99% of the bacteria were eliminated after either hand washing or washing via a washing machine. Thus, the health costs of reusable bags may be eliminated by appropriate consumer behaviour.

### 2.1.3 Environmental Issues

20% of participants claimed that they used their chosen preferred bag because they believed it was more environmentally friendly, although none identified environmental impact as a disadvantage of using plastic bags. Several participants (17%) noted that an increase in general awareness of the environmental issues surrounding plastic bags might encourage them to use reusable bags more often.

When asked whether they thought it was important to reduce plastic bag use, all participants said yes, and all cited environmental reasons for this. However, responses were generally vague, with very few participants expanding their answer beyond “it is better for the environment.” Those that did provide more detail most often mentioned the pollution that plastic bags cause, whereas only one commented on the unsustainable consumption of fossil fuels. It is interesting that responses to this question were influenced by the impact of plastic bags on consumers immediate environment – consumers can physically see plastic bag litter in their local area, but perhaps cannot directly witness the effects of petroleum consumption.



*“It is better for the environment to cut down on plastic bags”*



Paper bags are often marketed as an environmentally friendly alternative to plastic and indeed, many shops have switched to paper bags following the introduction of the 5p plastic bag levy. When asked if paper bags were a good alternative to plastic, 65% said yes, and of these, 76% cited environmental reasons (38% commented on biodegradability, 7% on recyclability and 30% simply said they were “better for the environment”). It is worth noting that while paper is considered a sustainable resource, the energy consumed during production of a paper bag is generally more than when producing a plastic bag. Thus, the question as to whether paper bags are better for the environment than plastic is complex. Some participants did show some awareness of this complexity.

*“If not reinforced with plastic, [paper] should degrade quicker and should be a sustainable”*

*“[paper is] biodegradable, but takes more energy to produce”*

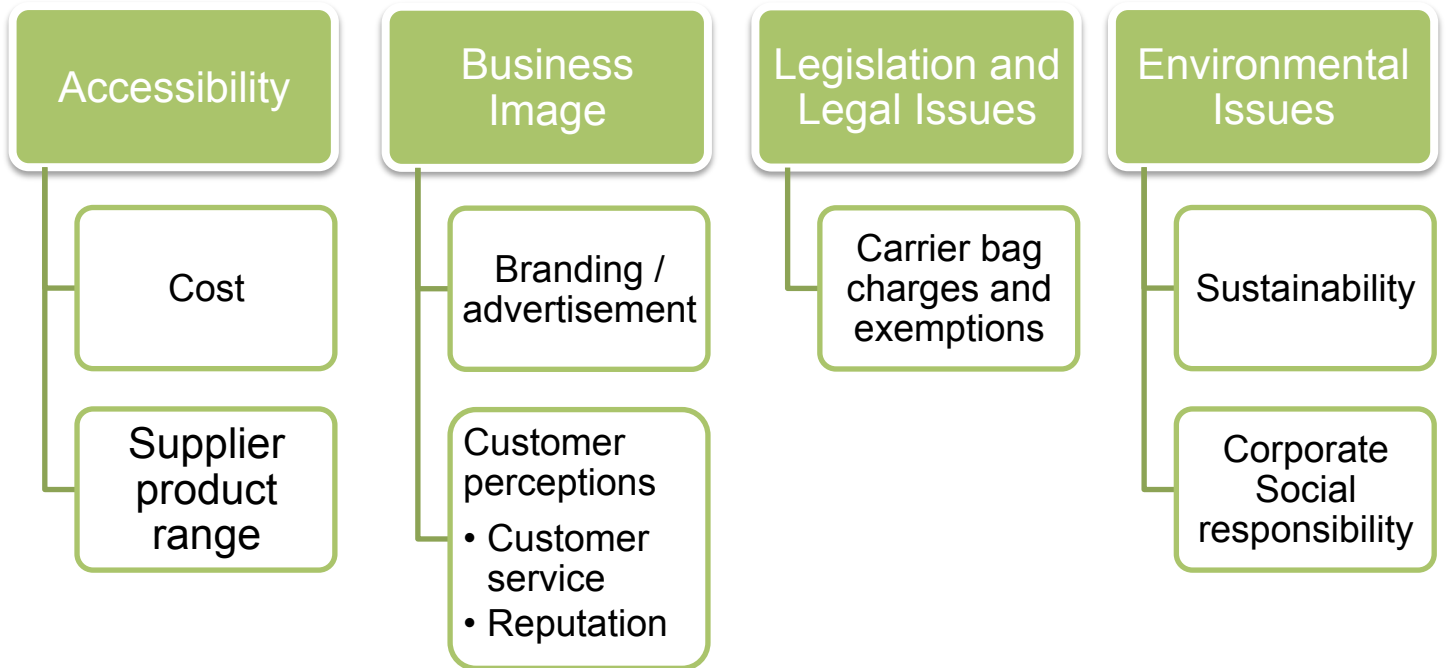
47% of participants also said they would view a store more positively if it went plastic bag free, and a further 33% said they would not view the store any differently. Of those that said they would view it more positively, 56% said that they would do so because it would imply the store is thinking about the environment, and a further 11% said they would like that the store was taking responsibility for its actions.

#### **2.1.4 Design**

Design of the bag had minimal impact on participant’s conscious decision to use it. Only one person specifically mentioned design as a key feature of their preferred bag, with two others identifying specific brands because of the prints they used.

*“I would like that they take responsibility for the impact they are having and are reflective on their”*

## 2.2 Business Owner Concerns



Four commercial business owners and branch managers were interviewed regarding their opinions on plastic bag use. Although our sample size was small, questions were open (Appendix C) and so a large amount of information was obtained. All business owners were interviewed in their own stores. Businesses consisted of one large chain store, one independent “corner shop,” one independent clothes store, and one emerging start-up business. Again, participant’s answers were compiled and four major concerns were identified: accessibility, business image, legislation and legal issues, and environmental issues.

### 2.2.1 Accessibility

All four of the businesses interviewed noted that, for one reason or another, alternatives to plastic bags were difficult to access. Of primary concern was the cost of alternatives in comparison to plastic; plastic bags were considered the cheapest option from a business perspective, closely followed by paper, whereas cloth and canvas were the most expensive. Interestingly, all four businesses did offer some form of reusable bag, despite their cost. However, generally these bags were perceived as part of the stock, rather than as something which could be offered to customers as an alternative to plastic.

Two of the four businesses interviewed (the large chain store, and the independent clothes store) also claimed that they provided plastic bags as opposed to alternatives because those were the materials offered to them by suppliers.

### 2.2.2 Business Image

Business image was also an important factor when business owners decided on their chosen bag. Particularly for smaller businesses, shopping bags served as another form of advertisement, with plastic bags featuring business names and logos for three out of four businesses interviewed. For an independent start-up business, the design of the bag was seen as critical for advertising; the store possessed a very specific target audience and so business exposure was critical for success. The store even went as far as to choose transparent plastic as their preferred material, so that shoppers in the street could see the goods inside the bag as they were walking along. Thus, the branding and advertisement potential of shopping bags is of utmost importance to business owners.

Another key concern for business owners, which also relates to business image, is customer perceptions and reputation. For the owner of an independent clothes store, it was important that the quality of his chosen bag matched the high quality of his stock. For this reason, he chose high quality and luxury paper bags the majority of the time, and only gave out plastic bags when it was either raining outside or whether he wanted to advertise a sale.

Generally, stores were worried that abolishing plastic bags from their stores would damage customer perceptions; offering customers a way of carrying their goods is important for good customer service, and since plastic bags were thought to be most practical for customers (paper bags were too flimsy, and reusable bags too expensive), eradicating these bags was thought of as inconveniencing customers. Interestingly, this assumption was not consistent with consumer reports; questionnaire data regarding consumer opinions revealed that 47% of participants thought they would view a store more positively if they stopped offering plastic bags, while an additional 33% said that it would make no difference.

### ***2.2.3 Legislation and Legal Issues***

Currently, the only UK legislation concerning the regulation of plastic carrier bags relates to the 5p carrier bag levy. Businesses that employ over 250 customers must charge customers 5p for each single-use plastic carrier bag that they use. Unlike other European countries, such as France, Greece, etc., there are no restrictions on regarding the type of material, or type of plastic, that can be used for single-use carrier bags. However, there are exemptions from the charge for plastic bags over a certain thickness, since these thicker bags are deemed as reusable.

Although none reflected on issues with the current legislation, two out of the four businesses did comment on potential future legislative changes; they believed that changes in legislation which restricted plastic bag use (e.g. increasing charges, out-right bans) would be a key factor in encouraging both themselves and other businesses to go “plastic bag free.”

### ***2.2.4 Environmental Issues***

Some businesses did comment on environmental issues, although for most, this was not of primary concern. Most business owners and branch managers claimed that they were fairly well-informed about the effects of plastic bags on the environment. However, it is important to note that subjective estimates of knowledge are not necessarily accurate.

### 3. EXISTING MARKETING STRATEGIES

#### 3.1 Replacement Schemes

Replacement schemes are those which encourage consumers to return used bags - usually reusable bags or “bags for life” - to store where they can receive a free or discounted replacement. Replacement schemes are a form of incentive scheme (see below) in that they reward consumers for using reusable bags. They are common among large UK supermarket chains, such as Sainsbury’s, and promote both the reuse and recycling of bags. Following the introduction of the 5p carrier bag levy, replacement schemes have become significantly more cost effective for consumers, with customers only having to pay a small fee the first time they use a reusable bag, rather than 5p each time.

Sainsbury’s, a leading UK supermarket chain, offers such a replacement scheme. After October 2015, the store substituted all single-use bags with thicker plastic which



Figure 1: An old (left) vs new (right) Sainsbury’s carrier bag

are sold for 5p - the equivalent to England’s single-use plastic bag charge – and can be returned to store for a free replacement. Although the bags are marketed as reusable,

they are not immediately distinguishable from single-use bags, and the only clear difference is in their thickness (fig 1.)

Sainsbury's report that during the first month of the plastic bag levy they sold 25.1 million of their new plastic bags, compared to the 319.7 million single-use bags sold by Tesco. These figures indicate that the scheme has indeed increased the rate at which Sainsbury's customers reuse their bags. It is important to note that other strategies employed by Sainsbury's may have also contributed to this significant increase in reuse rates. Such strategies include challenging the convenience of single-use plastic bags, by removing them from stores, and combatting consumer forgetfulness, by placing signs in car parks reminding customers to take their own bags.

Whether the increase in reuse rate is due to the replacement scheme itself or due to the other strategies implemented is difficult to determine. Whether or not customers actually exercise their right to return bags to store in exchange for a free replacement is questionable, and Sainsbury's are yet to release statistics regarding the matter. Other schemes employing refund or reward policies (see below) suggest that return rates for bags is generally low, with many trials reporting that less than 2% of shoppers return their bags to store. Whether return rates for replacement schemes mimic this figure is unclear, and it is feasible that the success of the scheme is related to the sheer inaccessibility of single-use bags, as well as the availability and convenience of more durable bags in Sainsbury's stores.

The new bag offered by Sainsbury's is significantly more expensive to produce than ordinary single-use plastic bags, emulating one of the major disadvantages of reusable bags as a whole. Consumers might expect to see this additional cost either reflected in more expensive bags or hidden in increasing food prices. However, Sainsbury's have chosen to shelter consumers from rising costs, charging the equivalent to that of a single-use bag. Thus, here the burden of cost falls to the business, rather than the consumer.

To get around this, Sainsbury's exploit a legal loophole in the plastic bag legislation; the legislation itself requires that all stores employing more than 250 individuals must charge at least 5p for single-use plastic bags, and a good proportion the income must be donated to "good causes." Since all Sainsbury's bags - barring those used for online deliveries - are made from thicker plastic, the supermarket is exempt from the legislation, and is not legally obliged to donate any of the money to good causes. As a result, all production costs can be covered by the cost of the bag.

For more information on the Sainsbury's reusable bag, visit <http://www.j-sainsbury.co.uk/responsibility/case-studies/2015/a-bag-for-good-causes/>

## 3.2 Incentive Schemes

In incentive schemes, customers are offered rewards for reusing bags, often in the form of discounts from their shopping. Sainsbury's have previously offered such a scheme, called the "Penny Back" scheme, where consumers were offered a 1p discount off their shopping for every bag they reused. The scheme ran from 1991 to 2005, with the company giving back £678,000 to customers in 2000-01 alone - an amount equivalent to 67m carrier bags. However, it ended due to claims that "very few" customers (less than 2%) were using the scheme.

Incentive schemes which aim to encourage recycling, rather than reuse, appear to be just as ineffective. In a recent trial in Sweden, less than 2% of customers of an electrical outlet store returned their bags in exchange for a refund of 2 Swedish Krona (18p, <https://www.edie.net/news/7/Does-this-refundable-charge-scheme-hold-the-key-to-a-circular-economy-/>). Whether such a scheme would be as ineffective in the UK or other countries is questionable, and it is important to note that the scheme was trialled only in one store of a large electrical outlet. It may be the case that food stores – or other stores which customers use habitually – may see a greater increase in the return rates of bags, as might smaller stores that have greater involvement within the local community.

It is worth noting that, Ocado, an online grocery store offering a 5p refund for return of single-use bags, report a 65% return rate of their single-use plastic bags for recycling. However, here, customers do not have to take bags with them when travelling to the store, but rather, can simply return bags to their delivery person during their next shop.

### **3.2.1 Successful Incentive Schemes: Reusable Coffee Cups**

Incentive schemes are popular among coffee chains aiming to reduce reliance on non-recyclable disposable coffee cups and encourage consumer's use of reusable cups. Since 1985, Starbucks – an international coffee chain – have offered a 25p discount on drinks for customers who bring their own reusable cup or tumbler. In addition, Starbucks have also made use of their own chain of reusable cups, sold at £1 each, and special promotion events in April of 2010 and 2011, offering customers a free brewed coffee for bringing in their own cups and tumblers. In April 2016, a trial took place where Starbucks increased its discount to 50p rather than 25p for customers who brought in their own reusable cup. However, this was withdrawn after three months (discount was reduced back to 25p) with no statement from Starbucks as to why.

Starbucks report that in 2011, they saw more than a 55% increase in personal tumbler use, and customers brought their own tumblers into stores more than 34 million times. Originally, the business aimed to serve at least 25% of drinks in reusable cups by 2015. However, due to difficulties keeping track of their "eating in" mugs, the brand re-evaluated their goal to focus on use of personal tumblers. An updated goal for

the company was to serve at least 5% of drinks in personal reusable tumblers by 2015, and this was achieved.

Whether a similar incentive scheme offering discounts on shopping for reusing bags is feasible in the UK is questionable, and the abolishment of Sainsbury's "penny back" scheme suggests that it is not. However, differences in the success of these schemes may be related to differences in both nominal and perceived rewards. Starbucks's scheme is extremely cost effective from a consumer perspective – since cups are sold for £1 each, a customer only has to use the cup four times before it effectively pays for itself. Conversely, the Sainsbury's "penny back" scheme appears less lucrative and requires significantly more effort on the part of the customer, with each customer having to return 100 bags to receive £1 off their shopping. Thus, it is recommendable that, in order to be effective, incentive schemes should be designed so that they are highly cost-effective for consumers, and the benefits of the scheme should require little effort on the part of the consumer.

### **3.2.2 Loyalty Schemes**

A common alternative to offering direct discounts on shopping in exchange for using reusable bags is to offer additional loyalty points instead. Many UK stores, including grocery stores, health beauty stores, electrical outlets, cafes and clothes stores, already have a loyalty card scheme in place, whereby customers collect "points" with each purchase they make. After accumulating enough, points can be exchanged for either shopping discounts or for free goods. Many stores offer exclusive promotional deals available only to those possessing a loyalty card, and in some instances, loyalty cards can be used to enter customers into prize draws or competitions. Since loyalty card schemes are store specific, they work best when implemented in stores that consumers visit regularly and habitually, such as grocery stores.

In 2006, Tesco – another of the UK's leading supermarket stores – offered its customers additional loyalty card points – termed "green points" – when they used either their own reusable bag or one of the cardboard boxes provided in store. The amount of points customers received was at the discretion of the checkout staff, and was determined based on the size of the bags used.

The scheme was hailed as a success, with Tesco claiming to have reduced plastic bag use by 50% within three years. Similar schemes have also been put in place in coffee shops; for instance, in Café Nero, customers can collect two loyalty stamps instead of the usual one if they bring their own reusable cup, which can then be exchanged for a free coffee.

Changing attitudes towards plastic and reusable bags, in part, relates to overcoming the natural human tendency to seek instant gratification, and encouraging consumers to invest more effort into the bags they use. Loyalty schemes play into this idea; whenever a consumer brings their own reusable bag to a store, they receive a discount on their purchase. Loyalty schemes are a powerful way to increase reusable bag use, with consumers in the WRAP survey identifying loyalty points as a key motivator for bringing in their own bags. It is likely that the success of loyalty schemes, like other incentive schemes, stems from challenging attitudes about

convenience and combatting consumer forgetfulness. Additionally, consumers may feel that loyalty schemes enhance the bag's value for money.

Despite its reported success, the scheme was retracted in 2015 upon the introduction of the 5p carrier bag levy, with Tesco stating that they had decided to focus their efforts on "supporting the Government in their approach to reducing carrier bag usage through the bag levy." It may be the case that the scheme was no longer financially viable for Tesco due to an expected increase in the number of customers using reusable bags.

### 3.4 Subscription Rewards

Magazines, blogs, newspapers etc. often offer reusable bags as a subscription reward for its readers. Such marketing schemes are known to be popular in Scandinavian countries such as Denmark and Finland, whose bag consumption is remarkably low compared to the remainder of Europe (the average for these countries is 4 plastic bags per year per person). Less popular in the UK, subscription rewards represent a potential avenue for exploration, especially with regards to more eco-conscious brands (e.g. Amazon Prime, by Amazon), or brands which have recently been criticized over their lack of environmental mindfulness (e.g. Netflix). Such a scheme might also be an option for fashion magazines, who might market reusable bags as a fashion accessory (e.g. Allure).

In 2008, the Daily Mail offered reusable cotton bags to all of its readers. While the bag was marketed as free, readers were required to send either 70p worth of stamps or a £1.25 cheque to cover postage and packaging. The daily mail claim that this scheme, as well as other efforts to reduce plastic bag use as part of the "banish the bag" campaign, has resulted in an estimated 418 million fewer bags being handed out each year, although it is questionable as to how reliable these figures are.

### 3.5 Sponsored Advertisement

An innovative means of distributing free reusable bags comes in the form of sponsored advertisement. Not yet common in the UK, sponsored advertisement again reflects a potential opportunity for exploration regarding distribution of reusable bags. Since branding, publicity and exposure are key concerns for businesses, the advertising potential of reusable bags provides suppliers with a unique opportunity to fund production and distribution costs via sponsored adverts.

The innovative idea of funding production costs via sponsored advertisement comes from Trashy Bags, a social enterprise and NGO based in Accra, Ghana. The enterprise has partnered with NGO CHF International in order to reduce plastic waste while improving the livelihoods of unemployed youth. The bag itself – the "trashy smart bag" – has proven to be popular in both Ghana and abroad, and is hand-made from 70 recycled drinking sachets per bag, making them both durable and washable. Each bag costs around GH¢ 2.50 to make (47p) and as a result of sponsored advertisement, can be



distributed to retailers and outlets at zero-cost to them. Retailers can then sell the bags for a minimum of GH¢ 1.00 (19p) Distributing the bags at zero cost is hugely advantageous to businesses, since they can test the saleability of the bags as well as reduce the amount they spend on single-use plastic bags. It is also advantageous to customers; since cost is no longer a barrier to businesses, the bags have the potential to become widely available.

In order to offer the bags at zero cost to retailers, revenue is collected from a scheme of sponsored advertising, which covers the cost of manufacturing and distribution. “Smart” stickers displaying the advertiser’s logo are placed on the outside of the bag. There are four different sizes of smart sticker, each having a different value: 25 pesewas (5p), 50 pesewas (9p), 1 GH¢ (19p) and 2.5 GH¢ (47p). Thus, applying a combination of stickers to the same bag it is possible to achieve a zero-cost for retailers. The bags also come with a small informational booklet raising awareness of environmental issues, which can be zipped into the base of the bag.

For more information on the bag, visit <http://www.trashybags.org/smartbag.htm>.

For more information on the trashy bags business plan, visit <http://www.trashybags.org/SGI/SGIWorkingDocument03.pdf>.

News reports on Trashy Bags: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T\\_hV3WUXg40](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T_hV3WUXg40)  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AxlxlM9cWa4>

News report on the Trashy bag’s “smart” bag:  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IHuHSj3ZJhs>

## **4. POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT**

### **4.1 Political Will**

Over the past several years, there has been increasing political will to introduce legislation regarding the regulation of plastic bag use in the UK. This change comes after first, an observed increase in plastic bag use in the UK by approximately 200 million between 2013 and 2014, and, second, the issuance of an environmental directive by the European Union to reduce plastic bag waste across Europe. The latter requires all twenty-eight EU member states to adopt measures ensuring that the annual consumption of plastic bags with a wall thickness of less than 50 microns does not exceed 90 bags per person by 2019, and 40 bags per person by 2025.

In response to both of these factors, the 5p plastic carrier bag levy was introduced across England during October 2015. The decision to introduce the levy as an effective means of reducing plastic bag use was based on the successes of carrier bag charges in Wales and Scotland - which saw carrier bag use reduced by 71% and 80%

respectively within the first year - as well as in other European countries such as Denmark (66% reduction) and the Republic of Ireland (90%).

The levy was just as successful in the UK, with plastic bag use being reduced by 85% just six months after being introduced. To carry through the legislation, politicians and policy makers needed to be mindful of the cost's that the levy posed to small businesses, and in an attempt to circumvent this problem, exemptions were included for businesses with less than 250 employees. Additionally, although many consumers welcomed the change due to environmental reasons, others did not; many believed that shops would use the levy as an excuse to "squeeze every last penny" out of customers. In this case, donation of income to environmental funds is likely to have garnered public support, and is expected to have increased public acceptance of the levy since it does not directly fund governments or businesses.

Alternate policy options to carrier bag levies include a complete ban of all plastic bags, regulation of micron thickness, voluntary reductions (arranged between the government and industry to encourage plastic bag reduction), and information or education campaigns. However, each approach must be considered within the context of the particular environmental, economic and social conditions in which it is implemented. Given the success of the levy, political figures in the UK are likely to argue that a move towards stricter legislation, such as a total ban of plastic carrier bags, is not necessary, and is likely to hurt smaller businesses. Some also reason that a total ban on plastic bags is likely to augment a move to paper bags, which are as cost-effective but not necessarily more environmentally friendly than plastic. As such, action taken by the British government in the coming years is likely to consist primarily of voluntary instruments, and educational campaigns.

## 4.2 Community Ownership

Endorsing community ownership and empowerment is likely to increase feelings of social responsibility and cohesion among members of the public. Prior to legislative action, plastic bag regulation in the UK was primarily focussed on voluntary action by retailers as well as community initiatives. A number of UK retailers, primarily large-scale British supermarket chains, have acted as trailblazers for developing initiatives to encourage more responsible consumer behaviour. Examples of these initiatives include Sainsbury's "Penny back" scheme as well as Tesco's "green points" scheme mentioned in section 3 above.

Environmental groups have also played a key role in promoting community participation and ownership. Community-funded and volunteer-run activist groups operating on a national level - such as "Friends of the Earth," "Keep Britain Tidy," "Surfers Against Sewage," "Campaign to Protect Rural England (CPRE) and "The Marine Conservation Society" - have been prominent in campaigning for reduced plastic bag use, issuing calls for action for both politicians and business owners alike. There is also

evidence of “bottom-up” community action across the UK, in which communities have banded together in efforts to make their local areas plastic bag free; in May 2007, all 43 shops in Modbury, Devon, stopped handing out plastic bags and, after a six month trial, the town went permanently plastic bag free ([http://www.bbc.co.uk/devon/content/articles/2007/11/02/modbury\\_plastic\\_bags\\_fo\\_rever\\_feature.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/devon/content/articles/2007/11/02/modbury_plastic_bags_fo_rever_feature.shtml)). Similar community initiatives have also taken place in Selkirk, Scotland (<http://www.scotsman.com/business/historic-first-in-the-bag-as-town-declares-war-on-plastic-1-1161685>) as well as in larger cities such as London (<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1244215/London-plastic-bag-free-city-2012-Olympics-plan-Boris-Johnson.html>).

### 4.3 Consensus Building

Building consensus among stakeholders is critical for settling complex multiparty disputes, and as a tool for conflict resolution, has become popular throughout environmental and public policy-making. The process allows stakeholders to come together to develop a mutually acceptable solution and is based in the idea of community participation in and ownership over decisions. The issue of plastic bag waste affects a large group of people and by including a variety of stakeholders in the decision-making process, rather than just government officials and experts, allows development of a solution which works for everyone.

Consensus building as a process can often be divided into stages, including problem and stakeholder identification, convening of stakeholders, framework design, problem analysis, evaluation of solutions, decision making and approval, and implementation of the proposed solution. Below, we outline a framework for consensus building with respect to plastic bags, in accordance with these stages. For a consensus building framework that outlines each of these stages in detail, go to: <http://www.beyondintractability.org/essay/consensus-building>.



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