

# Report on Less Plastic for Woodbridge

May 2009

## Preamble:

In July 2005 a short film was made for Inside-Out featuring my obsession with not generating waste. Not wanting to let the credibility my 'ten minutes of fame' gave to dissipate I decided to put it at the service of reducing plastic-bag use in Woodbridge, my local town. The damage caused by single-use plastic bags in the environment is out of scale both to proportion of total oil they consume and to their volume. It seemed to me that breaking into the closed circle of people's habits on bag-use was likely to make them more considered about many other aspects of consumption. It also seemed, following Rebecca Hoskins achievement in Modbury and the declaration of many towns, cities, even countries across the world that they planned to go plastic-bag-free, that in a small town of largely middle class people this would be pushing at an open door.

## **A year on: what have we achieved?**

### **Finding allies:**

1. Posters in the library and appeals in the EADT brought very little, but I and one local friend from the Waldringfield WI embarked – and found a third, most useful, ally through the EADT. Michael Hearn was especially clear in drawing up a plan of action, sourcing funds and keeping us to a time line. For personal reasons he ceased involvement in November 2008.
2. Once we had a plan we needed money: Michael Hearn solicited two locality budgets, from Claire Aitcheson and Ben Redsall, and Boots gave us £50.
3. Debbie Cash of Suffolk County Council Waste Minimisation team was most helpful with advice and with finalising and adding the art-work to the flier.
4. The Town Centre Management Group, through Marion Wells, has handled all money, thus allowing us to avoid all the hassle of formal constitutions, bank accounts etc. Marion has been hugely helpful and supportive throughout.
5. Budgen's of Woodbridge has provided storage for the bags.
6. b-Neutral, a shop selling eco-products has been beside us at all events – thus enabling us to promote 'less plastic' through its service of refilling Ecover plastic containers, each capable (say the company) of 50 journeys (I suspect many more!)
7. Fran Crowe (see [www.flyintheface.com](http://www.flyintheface.com)) has loaned us some of her stimulating and assertive art works and the laminated posters from her exhibition 'Walking to Save Some Sea', for each of our public events.
8. Regular phone calls to Sandra Leverett of Halesworth and Chris Turner of Newmarket who are trying to do the same thing have been very helpful. Both of them have achieved some reduction – not as much as they had hoped – and have moved on to other things.

### **Strategy:**

1. Source a long life bag
2. Offer it at a competitive price to shops to stock
3. Have a 'launch' of the bag and a promotional event in the Thoroughfare
4. Use other public happening in the town to publicise the problem and promote the bag.
5. Aim to have shops declaring they do not give out free-at-the-checkout bags on a window sticker by..... We never did quite decide on a date!

### **The Bag!**

It had to be long-life and as near organic and fair trade as possible. In common with the library and the Farmer's Market we found the company Canby to provide a bag that most nearly fulfilled these criteria at a reasonable price (see [www.canbyco.uk](http://www.canbyco.uk)) Canby has a particularly elegant (quotes Which?)

method of off-setting carbon which is to 'retire' the carbon credits it is entitled to buy thus removing that quantity of carbon immediately for ever from the market.

The bag advertises Woodbridge with the TCMG's 'Choose Woodbridge for Real Shopping' logo adapted with the addition of 'Less Plastic for Woodbridge.'

Anne and I between us visited all the shops in Woodbridge in May 2008 getting a feel for what their packaging policy is and asking them to stock the bag. Xx out of a possible total of about xx retailers did stock it. We gave away one free to every business which has a window and asked them to display it on our launch days in June.

### **The Launch!**

On 6<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> June 2008 we had a presence in the Thoroughfare supported by SCC, b-Neutral, Fran Crowe's art work and the Real Nappy Network. We had, strung up across the gap between two buildings, a washing line with 60 bags pegged onto it – being about one hundredth that we estimate were still being given out in Woodbridge per week. We gave out the leaflets and directed people to the shops that were stocking the bags.

### **Other events:**

We have had a presence at Maritime Woodbridge, a two-day event in September: here we promoted BeachWatch (thank-you Lynn Allen of Beach-Watch UK for excellent back-up) and at the Woodbridge Christmas Fayre.

## **SO A YEAR ON HOW EFFECTIVE HAVE WE BEEN?**

I have done a follow-up visit to shops to collect a survey sent out by the TCMG in May 2009 – visited about 90% of the shops.

I am not extrapolating quantified results from this survey as the data I was given is in general so impressionistic that a chart of ticks would give a false sense of accuracy. You will have to accept my impressions in good faith!

**Have the bags been sold?** Between us I and Budgen's have about 300 left. At the Easter Egg Hunt 500 were given away as goodie bags by the TCMG. The rest are either sold or held by the shops that stock them.

The bags have not moved particularly quickly: there are a large number of other long-life bags in circulation (indeed several local businesses have sourced their own), people have the choice of bags that are different sizes, are less aggressively branded, pack-up very small (like the excellent Fizzbags or the Onya range) or come more or less free like the Co-op bag-for-life.

**Have the leaflets all been given out?** No, obviously Anne and I are so reticent about giving out paper that might immediately become waste that we have been unduly stingy with them and still have the majority! Budgen's Manager Sean Casey is keen to use them, even with an out-dated date printed on them.

### **Survey Results from May 2009**

There are 94 businesses listed in The Town Centre Guide of which 35 are not relevant (restaurants, solicitors etc) I visited 61 businesses, many of them not listed in the Town Centre Guide. Some key ones have been left out, e.g. Adnams along with the other shops near the station but I think I have a representative sample.

#### Questions 1 and 2:

*Do you give out free at the check-out plastic bags? How many?*

All the food shops were doing this a year ago: now some have changed their policy see below. Most shops don't know how many they are giving out: the Cake Shop said we would have to ask the accountant – the shop attendants just hand them out – they hazarded a guess of 2 – 3000 per week. Few shops had actual figures: Woodbridge Books suggested 50 – 60 per day, Threshers 1000 per

week, the Green grocer 500 per week. Budgen's are fairly clear that they are still giving out 1.3 million annually i.e. about 26,500 per week. Only one quoted a really exact figure: M and Co said 24, 715 between February 2008 and February 2009.

Questions 3 and 4:

*Do you give out paper bags free at the check-out? How many?*

All the clothing shops had already started using paper bags last year. There seems to be little realisation that paper too has an environmental cost (especially because transport costs are high, paper being relatively heavy). They often quote using paper 'for environmental reasons'. I have the impression that the grocers shops are inconsistent in whether they are counting the veg bags, whether plastic or paper.

Questions 5, 6 and 7:

*Do you stock Less Plastic for Woodbridge bags? How many sold? Your own long life bags? How many sold? Other long life bags? How many sold?*

See appendix 2 for the list of stockists of LP4W bags.

- Many of the clothes shops had what was in effect a long life bag, on which the branding was important for their advertising, as well as the capacity and shape being important for protecting the purchase. Several claimed that 'regular' customers brought their bags when making a new purchase.
- Several shops sold a variety of long-life bags, especially the knick-knack shops. Of these the ones they particularly liked and recommended (easy to stock close to the till and likely to be frequently re-used as they could be stuffed into in a hand-bag) were the likes of Fizzbag and the Onya range.
- Budgen's stock a large range of long life bags, including LP4W.
- Both the booze shops stock a wine bag for a mere £1.40, made of recycled plastic bottles, but company policy is that they should use the company bags (made of degradable plastic in the case of Threshers) at the till – two bags for every three bottles of wine (I witnessed this for several minutes on a busy Friday afternoon after the other shops had closed!) The long-life bag cannot be displayed close to the counter, as the Fizzbags are in the knick-knack shops, because the booze shops have a contract with Wrigleys and Cadbury's that *their* stands occupy these premium positions.
- Many responses were about the aesthetics or size of the LP4W bag: too small, too garish, the wrong material..... A more helpful suggestion was allowing it to have Woodbridge branding on one side and shop branding on the other.

Questions 8 and 9:

*Have you noticed a decrease in single-use plastic bags? An increase in long life bags? How measured?*

- Some shops had introduced a policy of charging: Creasey the Butcher charged 5p per bag for some months last year and drove down the use they thought enough, so they no longer charge. The Newsagent started charging (and gets some lip for it) in ??? – they now sell 10 bags a day as opposed to giving away 50. The shop most frequently quoted is the Co-op which charges a variety of prices for a variety of different kinds of bags: ?? of the retailers I visited quoted this as a key factor in reducing the number of bags and increasing people's reliability in bringing their own – interestingly the manager of the Co-op thought it has made a difference of only 10 -15% (much less than others thought). But he was adamant and very clear that it had not driven away custom. Notcutts is charging 5P per bag which goes to charity. Budgen's donates a penny per bag not used to charity and has been able to divert £2,500 to community projects in this way over the last year.
- Almost all retailers claimed that there was a reduction in single use bags – few could be as accurate as P and R Shoe Repairs, who said that on current bag use for this year so far he is likely to be 11,500 bags down in 2009 on 2008. He is obviously good at making people feel, as he said, 'social pariahs' for accepting bags! This increased sense of guilt in shoppers at not having a long-

life bag with them was mentioned by a significant number of retailers. Barratt's have been charging 10p per bag for the last 18 months and claim a 50% decrease – they did it partly for environmental reasons and partly because they foresee a tax and want to 'get ahead of the game'.

#### Question 10:

*If you have changed your bag policy why?*

- Most shops are still waiting; some – the chains - are dependent on company policy; many have changed to paper; almost all are asking do you want and many are asking do you need a bag.
- The change in policy by the big supermarket chains is frequently quoted: Tesco is quoted as having the bags under the counter rather than help yourself; the Co-op – also under the counter but charged for; the Co-op bag for life endlessly renewed; Boots long life bag which has two bar codes, one for the original purchase and one for scanning on every subsequent purchase for points..... All these are seen to be having an effect. Shops that rely on collections of bags that can be re-used (Mr Voss, for instance, uses only second hand bags brought in by his daughter) claim to see a reduction in the number of Co-op bags (and therefore a rise in the proportion of Budgen bags).
- I am interested that Oxfam, having moved away from re-use bags a few years ago in favour of branded bags – as I understood it for hygiene reasons, but I may have that wrong – is now phasing those bags out in favour of re-use ones. I did not find time to visit the other charity shops.
- Some shops see legislation coming (see Barratts above) – but none quoted the Irish example as they did in our initial survey!
- Some shops are stocking two sizes of plastic bag – while this does not reduce the number of bags it does reduce the total amount of plastic and the cost to the shops, and perhaps sends a message.

#### Last questions:

*How relevant has LP4W been? How could we have been more effective? Any other comments?*

A few saw us (flatteringly) as vital; many said the change was coming anyway; most agreed that it needs something more than providing and promoting an alternative bag. One respondent dated the change from January 2008 – I wish he had not had so many customers so that I could have asked why so specifically then? He also thought that progress had been made in Woodbridge because it is a fairly middle class area – an idea corroborated by a young woman from Ipswich who thought it would be very different there.

On what would make a difference many had no suggestions: those who did have ideas regarded the following, in that order, as the most likely to effect change:

Charge for bags – all shops simultaneously

Keep the bags under the counter, not in sight

Ask if customers 'want' – or better – 'need' a bag

Advertise in all the free newspapers (one suggestion)

The local authority to give one long life bag to each house-hold and after that shops to charge  
(one respondent)

Give out the remaining leaflets explaining why plastic bags are so bad (one respondent) and other public education strategies.

I am going to be working with Budgen's to push this forward, and when our joint strategy is a little further refined will be happy to share it.

Last week I presented these findings to the Suffolk Coastal District Council Greenprint Forum. I understand from that meeting that SCDC is considering making their area plastic bag free (what exactly does that mean?) within two years. We are willing and keen to work with whoever is pushing this forward to develop and implement the most effective combination of carrots, sticks and nudges to achieve Less Plastic for Woodbridge!

Betsy Reid

Anne Maddison.

4<sup>th</sup> May, 2009

**Shops stocking the bags**

The Ark

The Bakehouse

B – Neutral

Budgens

Georgian Coffee House

Hallmark

Hogg at Home

*Loaves and Fishes – no longer trading*

Notcutts

Off the Wall

*Susan Rooke- no longer trading*

Splash

Co-op Indian near Wbr school

Many other shops have their own re-usable jute or cotton bags.