

Plastic bag policy firmed up, more calls for tax

Ralph Baxter reports

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As Hay-on-Wye becomes the latest town to encourage retailers to reduce plastic bag use, larger booksellers have also been reviewing their policy in recent times with further changes expected in 2008. The book trade's Environmental Action Group agreed a target (PN 23 November) to reduce carbon emissions by 10% and this includes policy on plastic bags, which are now entering their peak usage period as Christmas approaches.

Bookselling staff from all the chains are now requested to ask customers whether they wish to have a bag when they buy an item, but they have also been looking at ways to make further gains. WHSmith has set out its stance as follows: "We are working hard to reduce the environmental impact of our business. New carrier bag designs introduced in 2006 have already delivered a 28% reduction in the amount of plastic used. We are now taking this a step further: when a customer chooses not to take a carrier bag, we make a donation to the Woodland Trust, the UK's leading woodland conservation charity. Our target is to fund the planting of 10,000 trees by the end of 2008."

At Waterstone's, a spokesperson said: "Our policy regarding plastic bags is use fewer, reuse and recycle. Waterstone's plastic bags are made of 70% recycled material that is also then suitable for recycling again. Our bag is also designed for repeat usage. There are signs at all tills asking 'Do You Need a Plastic Bag?' and booksellers are instructed to ask the same question where appropriate. We also sell a very popular tote bag, and will be introducing a reuseable, biodegradable cloth bag in the New Year."

A number of areas in Britain are looking into taxing plastic bag use (as happened in Ireland in 2002), with this week's news about Hay-on-Wye just the latest instance. However, the British Retail Consortium says the tax isn't necessary, arguing that plastic bags are more energy-efficient than paper bags, take up less than 0.3% of landfill and help prevent theft.

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