

PLASTIC-FREE MARKETS

Exploring how to remove plastic bags from
Tower Hamlets celebrated markets

Insights and recommendations - June 2022



POWERED BY
Wen.

RiCE MARKETING
Experts in local & retail

INTRODUCTION

Tower Hamlets' celebrated fruit and veg markets are a vital part of the borough's diverse local food economy. They have historical and culturally rich roots and host diverse but typically less affluent local populations. They are essential for people on low incomes and help community inclusion.

Through the Plastic-Free Markets project, Rice Marketing have been exploring what a 'just transition' could look like for Tower Hamlets markets. This includes how market traders can be supported to be agents of change, and how to lessen environmental impact whilst also protecting their livelihoods.

The impact of plastic on the environment is well-known, both in terms of CO2 emissions and marine pollution. Tower Hamlets markets are heavily reliant on plastic bag use. An estimated 2 million plastic bags are used each year at Crisp Street market alone.

In March 21, Rice Marketing began a research and pilot project, working with traders in three Tower Hamlets markets to reduce the amount of plastic bags they use when selling fruit and veg to customers. This report sets out key findings and recommendations.

The Plastic-Free Markets project is part of the [Just Food and Climate Transition \(Just FACT\) Programme](#), which is funded by the National Lottery Community Fund's 'Climate Action Fund'.



WHAT WE DID

Phase 1: Insight gathering

Rice Marketing carried out 6 months of research in Chrisp Street, Watney and Whitechapel markets.

There are 5 traders in Chrisp Street, 8 traders in Watney and multiple traders in Whitechapel who service the local population with a broad range of fruit and vegetables. Rice Marketing explored the feasibility of removing the two types of plastic bags used on the markets;

- Clear plastic bags that are used to pre-pack fruit and veg at a £1 price point
- Blue carrier bags

The research included:

- 1) Trader consultation in all three markets, and in-depth conversation with two ambassador traders, Toklas Miah and Dilu Miah, in Chrisp Street market with whom they already had a relationship. These conversations had to grow organically and over multiple visits to develop trust and to fit in around trader availability.
- 2) Observational research with shoppers whilst on the market.
- 3) A customer survey of 24 people, in partnership with Sunny Jar Eco Hub (who run 'Plastic Free Poplar')
- 4) Comparative visits to other London markets; Walthamstow, Southwark, Kingston.
- 5) A Time and Motion Study.

Trader consultation findings:

- 1) £1 pre-packed bags are at the heart of the traders' business model which enable them to be commercially viable while keeping costs down for customers.
 - They are cheap for traders to buy.
 - There is no need to spend time pricing, because plastic bags signpost the price.
 - This easy signposting of price also helps overcome language barriers.
 - The bags can be filled in the early morning when customers are scarce and can be replenished at quieter trading times during the day.
 - Labour is reduced during the day as transaction time is short.
 - Bags protect the produce from handling by traders and customers.
 - Bags give a simple stock management system.
 - Traders can manage an extended product range.



- 2) Traders were sceptical about alternatives such as bowls. They thought customers wouldn't like the bowls as they are hard to keep clean.
- 3) Traders believe that if they stopped using either type of plastic-bag their customers would go elsewhere, and the most important thing for traders was remaining competitive with other stall holders in the same market.
- 4) The traders do not feel powerful enough to change customer behaviour, and think customers will not bring their own carrier bags until the 10p charge is introduced. One trader told us that the 10p plastic-bag charge in shops is starting to have an impact, and they see far fewer bags leaving the shops that implement it.

Customer survey findings:

- 1) We learnt that customers also like the £1 pre-packed plastic bags.
 - They are transparent, so customers can check the quality of produce before purchasing.
 - Bags clearly signpost the price.
 - Transaction time is short as the bags are easy to pick up and pay for.
 - Customer service is fast and efficient.
- 2) The few customers we spoke to about alternatives such as loose and bowls set they wouldn't mind these options as they clean their fruit and veg at home anyway.
- 3) Not many customers bring their own bags to the market or to the surrounding shops. A few people talked about not having enough good quality ("posh", "nice", "strong") bags to carry their shopping.

- 4) Customers said they would rather bring their own bags rather than pay the 10p charge.

Our observational research confirmed that few shoppers bring their own bags, though some bring trolleys to carry their shopping home, or bigger bags to put the blue plastic bags in. Many shoppers were also carrying 4 – 5 bags from multiple market retailers.

Discussing solutions

Traders felt that for change to be effective, it had to be adopted across the market and ideally across all markets in the borough.

Traders felt that a total ban on plastics across the borough was needed to allow a level playing field, and this needed to be a Local Authority led change.

The traders felt that the easiest first win was to charge for blue vest carrier bags, where there was already clear government legislation in place. The legislation would need enforcement to ensure compliance from across all traders. Following that, a wider ban could be implemented with traders moving to bowls or loose.

The customers we spoke to also supported more action from the government and Local Authority, saying they should take the lead in banning plastics.

Other solutions mentioned by shoppers were paper bags, having more access to



TIME AND MOTION STUDY

As part of our research, we visited other markets and did a time and motion study; both of which indicated that switching to loose produce or bowls could be just as time and cost effective.

We spent time on the market speaking to one of the market traders, Toklas Miah, to find out more about his current model. He gave us the narrative and we blocked it into a process (below) to understand how the current model

operated and what would need to change if the traders moved to bowls or to selling loose produce. We were able to show the breakdown of hours by each stage of the day and how they differed.

The model does not show an added time saving by switching to loose or bowls, but Toklas was confident that once he started, he would not need to re-direct the same number of people from packing to serving. This was not proven during this phase of the trial.

Current Model

Set up rig
unload stock from storage unload new stock from wholesale market
determine price per volume for all lines
pack products into £1 bags (this takes 2 people * 4 hours = 8 hours)
Set up stall for trading
loose products displayed in wholesale case
£1 bags displayed in piles
price the loose products

Set Up
(8.00-10.00)
Team = 7
14 Hours

customers self serve the majority of range
few products require weighing/pricing low customer selection time
£1 bags put straight into customer shopping bag (or vest carrier) low transaction time

**Trade
throughout
the day**
(10.00-4.00)
Team = 7
42 Hours

Pack loose stock for o/n storage Break down £1 bags for o/n storage Simple activity

Pack Up
(4.00-5.30)
Team = 7
10.5 Hours

Current Model: Hours per day
66.5

Bowls

Set up rig
unload stock from storage unload new stock from wholesale market
determine price per volume for all lines
pack products into £1 bowls
Set up stall for trading
loose products displayed in wholesale case
£1 bowls displayed in piles
price sticks for the loose products

**7
Hours**

customers self serve the majority of range
few products require weighing/pricing low customer selection time £1 bowls put into brown paper bag or emptied into customer shopping bag or vest carrier med. transaction time

**49
Hours**

Pack loose stock for o/n storage Pack contents of £1 bowls for o/n storage Simple activity
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**10.5
Hours**

Bowl Model: Hours per day
66.5

All Loose

Set up rig
unload stock from storage unload new stock from wholesale market
determine price per volume/weight for all lines
Set up stall for trading
loose products displayed in wholesale case
price sticks for the loose products

**7
Hours**

customers served the full range majority of products require weighing/pricing med. Customer selection time purchases put into brown paper bag or emptied into customer shopping bag or vest carrier high transaction time
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**49
Hours**

Pack loose stock for o/n storage simple activity - may require more space
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**10.5
Hours**

Loose Model: Hours per day
66.5

WHAT WE DID

Phase 2: Introduction of the 10p carrier bag charge

Based on the research Rice Marketing proposed a 2 staged approach to removing plastic bags

- 1) Roll out the 10p carrier bag charge to reduce blue carrier bag use
- 2) Support the transition to loose or bowls

The pilot looked at the first stage: rolling out the 10p carrier bag charge, as a first step to reducing plastic from markets.

Tower Hamlets Borough Council Market Services team agreed to promote the 1 current 10p charge legislation in Chrisp Street, Watney and Whitechapel markets. This was rolled out in September with:

- a newsletter announcement, laminated posters explaining the charge to customers
- site visits and conversations with traders over a three-week period.

Initial support waned when only 30% of traders displayed posters. Those traders who were compliant felt that non-compliant traders had a competitive advantage.

8 weeks into the trial 12 stall holders signed an open letter to the Council asking for them to enforce the charge to create a level playing field. Without enforcement there were concerns that the current reduction seen in blue plastic bags may not be sustained.

At the end of this trial in March 22, this was still being considered.

Impact

Although there was inconsistent uptake, we had reports of an immediate drop in blue bag usage after 3 weeks.

According to the bag supplier, **the volumes of blue vest bags reduced by 33% across the three markets.** This reduction of 7,000 bags / week is equivalent to 39kg plastic / week.

If the reductions were maintained over a year that would be 364,000 plastic bags / year avoided (equivalent to 2,002kg plastic). In terms of emissions savings, this would be 126kgCO₂e saved / week, or 6,546kgCO₂e saved / year. The annual savings are equivalent to a passenger taking 26 x return flights Rome.

According to the bag supplier, in October the volumes of bags remained consistently at the lower levels.

One trader told us that they are saving £150 / week because no longer having to buy bags, so the transition also is a commercial opportunity to save money.

“NOW I USE 500 BAGS PER WEEK COMPARED TO 7000 BAGS BEFORE. THIS HAS HELPED ME REDUCE COSTS AND THAT’S REALLY IMPORTANT RIGHT NOW AS ALL OTHER COSTS ARE GOING UP” - MARKET TRADER

NEXT STEPS

Recommendations for Tower Hamlets Council

Reducing plastic from Tower Hamlets markets is a key step on the road to net zero.

A borough-wide approach to is needed in order to create a level playing field for market traders, allowing them to remove plastic without it having a detrimental effect on their business.

Below are recommended steps for overcoming barriers and taking further action, developed in partnership with market traders.

Removal of carrier bags

1) Full roll out the 10p charge

Findings from the pilot suggests that a 10p charge would result in significant reductions in plastic use, whilst also helping traders save money.

For this to be effective a consistent approach is needed, that includes enforcement of the charge through Trading Standards. Without enforcement the removal of plastic bags from Tower Hamlets is unlikely to be effective.

2) Communicate clearly with customers and traders alike

Support the switch through clear and consistent communications over time. Time is needed to allow for people to adjust to new ways of working and shopping.

Consider supporting schemes that make it easier for shoppers to access and use reusable bags, for example, bespoke, cotton tote bags that can be given away.

Removal of pre-packed bags

Once the 10p charge has been embedded, develop a plan for transitioning away from plastic to more loose products (using bowls as appropriate for selling in volume).

Price sticks for the loose product could be provide, as designed for East St market, to facilitate the shift.

Key considerations:

1) Work with the whole market rather than individual traders.

Traders are willing to make changes to their business model, but this change needs to happen at a whole market level to avoid any individual traders being put at a competitive disadvantage.

2) A joined up approach is needed to protect livelihoods

Rent prices have gone up for traders and also poses a concern. Any approach has to be joined up and take into account other pressure on traders. There is a need to work with traders to find solutions are more affordable and present a lower risk.

3) Traders may need financial support or equivalent

Funding for the market traders could help to potentially offset a loss of income during a transition period away from plastic bags.

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