

# You Can... **Help to reduce the plastic bag mountain**

*There is nothing worse in the middle of winter than seeing dozens of supermarket shopping bags caught in tree branches. It is a clear reminder that these everyday objects take years to biodegrade, during which time they become grey, are an environmental hazard and an eyesore. As a result, there is increasing pressure on supermarkets to change their policy on the distribution of plastic bags and is an area that schools can actively support. As of the 2008 Budget, supermarkets will be required to actively reduce the number of bags issued or face penalties.*

## **Thinking points**

- Over 10 billion plastic bags are used in Britain each year. They cause the deaths of over 100,000 animals and take around 400 years to biodegrade.
- The main supermarkets in France, Belgium and Scandinavia have, for several years, stopped providing free plastic bags. Instead, customers are encouraged to bring their own bags or can purchase hemp and long-life ones from the counter. It has, unsurprisingly, had little impact on their profit or the number of customers. These supermarket giants have taken the opinion that the general public are responsible enough to bring their own bags and will do so if bags are not available.
- In the UK over the last couple of years increasing pressure, both environmentally and from the public, has encouraged the reduction of free bags. The Co-op has trialled scaling down their use in selected areas, and B&Q and Marks and Spencer have enforced a 5p levy on all single-use bags.

## **Tips, ideas and activities**

- Approaching a cloth bag company to produce book bags with the school logo on is not only a fund-raising opportunity but they are also useful for PE kits, books or shopping.
- Plastic bags can be recycled to produce school items such as rulers and protractors. These are available from general schools resource catalogues and should state that they are from recycled material.
- The environment officer should be able to source an appropriate bag collection container (similar to the ones used outside large supermarkets) for school recycling.
- As part of a literacy lesson, children or the school council could write to their local MP raising their concerns about plastic bags. An MP is obliged to write back to each child individually on House of Commons headed paper and to then pass on their comments to the appropriate Select Committee who will also reply to the school. Not only does this give children a meaningful opportunity to use their writing skills but it is a responsible use of their civil rights.
- Increasing areas of the country are becoming bag free (as inspired by Rebecca Hosking's work in Modbury, Devon). Find out whether there is a movement against plastic bags in your area.
- Below are some useful websites that could help inform how to reduce the use of plastic bags:  
<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/england/devon/6911780.stm>  
[www.onyabags.co.uk](http://www.onyabags.co.uk)  
[www.biobag.no](http://www.biobag.no)

