

## INDEPENDENT VIEW

## MYSTERY SHOP

## Indies shine on household products

This month, our mystery shopper visited five convenience and smaller stores in the Leeds area to see how their household goods offers compared

When it comes to core household products, smaller format stores in Leeds score pretty highly as far as availability goes. Costcutter, Sainsbury's Local and Lupton Stores stocked all five of the items on our list, while Iceland and independent retailer Farnley Convenience both failed on just one item.

Price-wise it was a mixed picture. Sainsbury's cheapest pack of toilet rolls was a full 25p more than its closest rival at £1.25 per 4-pack. Iceland too was pretty pricey, its washing up liquid 20p more expensive than its nearest rival. Farnley Convenience beat its multiple and symbol group rivals on both washing-up liquid and bleach. So the multiples aren't always undercutting their independent rivals in this category.

On the standard basket of 10 products, Sainsbury's undercut the competition by 15p on cheapest brand bread but was most expensive for a 500ml bottle of cola. None of the stores stocked filter coffee. The only other gaps were for Farnley Convenience on bananas and Iceland on painkillers.

Three stores scored top marks on customer service, but Farnley Convenience let itself down in this area. Our shopper was offered no advice on where else to buy the coffee or bananas and was made to feel self-conscious walking around the store. "I noticed a man wearing a luminous work jacket standing in the middle of the store," she said. "I thought he was a customer but later found out he was the store manager. He watched me intently as I walked round the shop with my shopping list."

The store redeemed itself slightly on the community front by featuring local events and personal adverts. But the poor service was in stark contrast to Sainsbury's, where staff were helpful and attentive and regular shoppers were greeted by name. Sainsbury's Local came out top for services, ticking every box and drawing attention to both lottery and photocopying services with prominent window displays. It also scored well on community services.

PRICE & SERVICE COMPARISON	COSTCUTTER	SAINSBURY'S LOCAL	ICELAND	LUPTON STORES	FARNLEY CONVENIENCE
<b>10 CONVENIENCE PRODUCTS</b>					
Sliced white bread (800g) – cheapest brand	1.25	0.85	1.00	1.25	1.39
Milk (1 pint) – semi-skimmed	0.46	0.45	0.45	0.55	0.54
Banana	0.30	0.25	0.18*	0.30	DNS
Painkiller (8-pack) – cheapest brand	0.45	0.55	DNS	0.55	0.49
Coke or cheapest cola (500ml)	0.92	1.05	0.25*	0.99	0.95
Walkers crisps cheapest brand (standard packet – 34.5g)	0.55	0.45	0.21*	0.39	0.40
Water cheapest water (500ml)	0.59	0.49	0.50	0.60	0.59
Mars bars (standard)	0.42	0.46	0.30*	0.42	0.49
Filter coffee (227g packet) – cheapest	DNS	DNS	DNS	DNS	DNS
Autfood (Whiskas pouch) or cheapest brand	0.36	0.35	0.30	0.35	0.39
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>£5.30</b>	<b>£4.90</b>	<b>£3.19</b>	<b>£5.40</b>	<b>£5.24</b>

## HOUSEHOLD PRODUCTS – 1 point for each stocked

Toilet tissue 4 rolls	1	1	1	1	1
Washing-up liquid 500ml bottle	1	1	1	1	1
Dish cloths	1	1	1	1	0
Light bulb	1	1	0	1	1
Bleach	1	1	1	1	1

## CUSTOMER SERVICE – 1 = good 0 = below average

Courteous	0	1	1	1	0
Knowledgeable	1	1	1	1	0
General helpfulness	0	1	1	1	0
Standard of dress	1	1	1	1	0
Personal hygiene	1	1	1	1	1

## SERVICES – 1 = good 0 = below average

Cash/bill pay	0	1	0	1	0
Lottery/bingo	1	1	0	1	0
Communication top-up/post office	1	1	0	1	0
Administrative fax, photocopying, email or collection	0	1	0	0	0
Fresh food barbecue, deli, local produce, bakery, coffee	1	1	0	0	0

## COMMUNITY – 1 = good 0 = below average

Bus stop/local service	1	1	1	1	1
Local events advertised	1	1	0	1	1
Personal adverts	1	0	0	1	1
Charity collection boxes	0	1	0	1	0
Locally made products and/or loyalty card scheme	0	1	1	0	0
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>8</b>

Notes: 1. Multipack of seven for £1.25. 2. £1.50 for 3 litres. 3. Multipack of six for £1.25. 4. Multipack of five for £1.50.



Andrex remains the behemoth of the toilet tissue category with value sales of £337.3m in 2008, dwarfing those of closest rivals Velvet (£104.2m) and Charmin (£54.8m), according to The Grocer's Top Products Survey 2008. But brands were put firmly in the shade last year by own label – sales in the toilet tissue category soared 9.2% as cash-strapped consumers reined in their spending on luxury goods.

## Costcutter

**Address:** Lincoln Green Road, Leeds  
**Time & date:** 4 February 2009 at 10am  
 The store was quiet when our shopper visited on a weekday morning, although a handful of customers were queuing to use the post office at the back. Aisles were well merchandised and easy to navigate, and only the filter coffee was not stocked. The sole cashier, however, was unfriendly and bluntly replied, "We don't sell it", when asked about the coffee.

## Lupton Stores

**Address:** Lupton Avenue, Leeds  
**Time & date:** 4 February 2009 at 11am  
 Shelves were fully stocked in this small store. It boasted four aisles complete with chillers stocking fresh and frozen produce. Despite its cluttered appearance, products were surprisingly easy to find. All but one of the products was stocked (again, the filter coffee was the item missing). The checkout assistant was keen to make polite conversation, leaving our shopper with the impression of a store at the hub of its local community.

## Iceland

**Address:** Torre Lane, Leeds  
**Time & date:** 4 February 2009 at 12pm  
 Sandwiching two discount stores, this shop was easy to navigate and well merchandised. Four staff members were busy stocking shelves and three of the five tills were open, resulting in no queue at the checkout. Eight out of the 10 items were stocked, the exceptions being the coffee and the painkillers.

## Sainsbury's Local

**Address:** Stainbeck Road, Leeds  
**Time & date:** 4 February 2009 at 12.45pm  
 The store was clean and well presented with highly visible point of sale displays and prices clearly displayed. Once again, the filter coffee was not stocked. The service was fast and polite – one member of staff asked our shopper if she required assistance as she looked inside a chiller cabinet. The time spent queuing at the checkout was just two minutes.

## Farnley Convenience Store

**Address:** Tong Approach, Leeds  
**Time & date:** 4 February 2009 at 2pm  
 A number of prominent adverts and posters were displayed in the window of this independently owned store. Inside, the entrance area was cluttered with boxes. The majority of items were easy to find with the exception of the bananas and the coffee, which were not stocked. When our shopper asked about their availability she was told that they didn't have any and wasn't offered any recommendations as to where she might be able to purchase them.



## INTERVIEW: MR &amp; MRS MYSTRY, OWNER/MANAGERS, LUPTON STORES

## Who are your key suppliers and are you happy with them?

We go to the cash & carry every day; we also use Madina for milk deliveries, Happy Bread for bread and Bobby's for cakes. We wouldn't mind using specialist suppliers instead of the cash & carry, as long as the service was good and the price was right.

## Who are your local competitors?

Iceland and B&M Bargains are just around the corner. How has the mix of products and services at your store changed in the past 12 months?

We have recently introduced a PayPoint cash machine and a lottery terminal, which have been well received.

What are you doing to promote healthy eating? We have a lot more fresh fruit and vegetables and healthy snacks such as cereal bars. We also tell the kids around here to swap their crisps and

chocolate for something healthy, although it doesn't often change their minds! Are you concerned about supermarkets taking sales from smaller independent stores?

Yes, of course, but older customers prefer to come to us anyway because it's easier for them and we always chat to them. They even come and tell us their problems – we're really friendly with the locals.

What is your opinion on the legislation to sell cigarettes under the counter?

This won't make a difference at all; it will probably only serve to encourage the illegal sale of cigarettes.

Have you had offers of black market goods since the recession kicked in?

We have had a few people offering alcohol, but we don't entertain them – it's not worth the risk.

What is the best news you have received so far this year? Our lottery margin has

## STORE FACTS

**Address:** Lupton Stores, Lupton Avenue, Leeds  
**Owner:** Mr & Mrs Mystry  
**Tenure:** 20 years  
**How do you feel about the mystery shop?**  
 I'm really shocked and surprised. I know about The Grocer Magazine and the mystery shop but I never thought we'd have one done.

