

The Single Use Carrier Bags Charges (England) (Amendment) Order 2021

Link policy briefing

Executive summary

The changes to the Single Use Carrier Bags Charges are a step in the right direction, but the government must do much more to incentivise reuse and reduce avoidable waste. As a first step, Ministers should:

- Expand the carrier bag charge to cover paper bags, bringing England into line with the devolved administrations
- The charge should include lightweight fruit and vegetable bags which are currently a major source of plastic waste
- Prevent the continued rise in bag for life sales by raising their cost to a level which effectively disincentivises purchases; at least 70p
- Follow the lead of numerous businesses who have already removed single use plastic bags from sale, by considering a ban on the sale of single use plastic carrier bags.

The Single Use Carrier Bags Charges (England) (Amendment) Order 2021 is being made to increase the minimum amount that sellers must charge for a single use carrier bag from 5 pence to 10 pence and to extend the obligation to charge for these bags to all retailers. It is intended to reduce the usage of bags and the litter associated with them whilst allowing for their continued use where necessary.

There is an urgent need to tackle plastic pollution. Our countryside and beaches are littered with plastic and there are approximately 51 trillion microscopic pieces of plastic, weighing 269,000 tons, in our seas.¹ In addition, the UN has reported that resource extraction and processing causes 90% of global biodiversity loss and water stress, as well as 50% of overall carbon emissions.² In 2016, plastics production alone accounted for 6% of total global carbon emissions and, based on projected growth, it is estimated this could increase to 13% by 2040.³

Wildlife and Countryside Link (Link) is the largest environment and wildlife coalition in England, bringing together 58 organisations to use their strong joint voice for the protection of nature. We have previously responded to a Defra consultation in 2019 on this policy, this response is available at:

- [Consultation response to the single-use plastic bag charges changes](#)

While we welcome the changes being made to the single use carrier bag charges, there are a number of areas where the policy still falls short.

¹ <https://www.sas.org.uk/our-work/plastic-pollution/plastic-pollution-facts-figures/>

² UN International Resource Panel, 2019, Global resources outlook 2019: natural resources for the future we want

³ WWF Report 2019 - Solving Plastic Pollution Through Accountability

1. The charge should be extended to cover paper bags and lightweight plastic bags

To avoid the negative environmental impacts of a simple substitution of one single-use material for another, England should consistently apply the charge to paper bags too. In Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, most types of paper bags are included in the charge, whereas in England these are exempt and will continue to be so.

Paper bags carry environmental costs which cannot be ignored. For example, although partly due to their large share of the packaging market, in 2018 paper and card were responsible for more UK greenhouse gas emissions than any other packaging material.⁴ In 2014, the Environmental Audit Committee noted: "Exempting paper bags from the charge... would weaken the message to reuse bags, diminish the impact of the charge and the likely reduction in the number of bags used and associated environmental benefits. The government should therefore include paper bags in the charge".⁵ This conclusion stands today, and we encourage England to follow the lead of devolved nations. An analysis of carrier bag charges for the Welsh Government found that 47% of retailers who issued single use paper bags reported a decrease in the number they had handed out since the Welsh charge had been introduced (with only around 2% reporting an increase),⁶ demonstrating the success of the charges in disincentivising paper bag use.

Charges should also be extended to ultra-lightweight plastic bags used for fruit and vegetables. 1.3 billion of these bags were consumed by 10 major UK supermarkets, as reported in a 2018 survey of the sector.⁷ The government should look to progressively phase these out, beginning with the introduction of a charge, and aiming to ban them in the medium-term. Many businesses are already acting on removing these bags. Morrisons has removed all plastic bags from its fruit and vegetable areas in store,⁸ and last year Aldi scrapped the use of single use plastic bags for fruit and veg and instead introduced a 25p reusable bag made of recycled bottles.⁹

A shift away from single use produce bags would require additional supportive measures to encourage retailers to roll out reusable produce bags and loose product ranges. This could be achieved through funding research and development in scalable refillable formats and close-loop packaging systems, citizen and corporate education campaigns, and encouraging companies to provide incentives for packaging re-use.

2. Bags for life are currently under-priced, incentivising increased use of these more resource intensive items

The focus on single use carrier bags has diverted attention from the growing consumption of bags for life. Given the weight of these stronger bags, it is likely that the amount of plastic used in the nation's bags has actually increased since the introduction of the single use bag charge.¹⁰

Supermarket Iceland, for example, stopped selling 5p plastic bags in 2018, but reported that despite removing a quarter of a billion single use carrier bags from circulation, the actual volume of plastic remained

⁴ https://green-alliance.org.uk/resources/Fixing_the_system.pdf

⁵ <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201314/cmselect/cmenvaud/861/86105.htm#note86>

⁶ <https://gov.wales/sites/default/files/statistics-and-research/2019-07/160314-post-implementation-review-single-use-carrier-bag-charge-en.pdf>

⁷ <https://checkingoutonplastics.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/Checking-out-on-plastics.pdf>

⁸ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-56673900>

⁹ <https://www.walesonline.co.uk/whats-on/shopping/tesco-asda-morrisons-aldi-lidl-20348932>

¹⁰ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-50579077#:~:text=Sales%20of%20%22bags%20for%20life,tonnes%2C%20Greenpeace%20research%20has%20found.>

unchanged.¹¹ Across the supermarket sector, in 2019 the 10 largest supermarkets handed out more than 1.58 billion bags for life.¹²

This trend has been observed across the world. In Taiwan, a rise in plastic tonnage was also reported after the introduction of a levy on sales of single use carrier bags, with customers swapping to thicker plastic options.¹³ A simple switch could lead to a range of negative environmental outcomes. In the Northern Territory of Australia, 5 years after the ban on thin plastic bags (below 35 microns) was introduced, a survey revealed that plastic pollution was increasing, with correlation to a behavioural change of people buying thicker bags but treating them as single-use items.¹⁴

Despite this evidence, the government have recently stated that they “do not believe there is currently a case” to obligate retailers to charge for bags for life, because they “are not typically given away by retailers for free due to the higher costs of acquiring them”.¹⁵ However, to incentivise reuse and prevent bags for life turning into a single-use option the government must reassess this stance and consider a minimum price increase. Given their higher plastic content and the projected future increase in their sales, a lack of intervention could jeopardise the environmental gains achieved through the single use carrier bag charge. At present, the problem is masked by a lack of requirements for large supermarkets to report on sales of bags for life and incentivised by supermarkets being free to keep the entire income made from selling these bags.

Noting that bags intended for reuse fall outside the Climate Change Act 2008, the government should still address this loophole. The Republic of Ireland, recognising the need to incentivise reuse, has made reusable plastic bags exempt from its charge, provided the retailer charges at least 70 cents¹⁶. The Irish charge was designed to be six times higher than the price consumers reported that they were willing to pay. Recent polling found that 58% of people were willing to pay 20p for a supermarket carrier bag. Out of that 58%, 34% would pay as much as 50p and 6% even said £1¹⁷.

Taking the Irish example as a guide, government should consider a charge of at least 70p being introduced for bags for life.

3. The government should consider an outright ban on single use carrier bags

The government is committed in its 25 Year Environment Plan to eliminate all avoidable plastic waste. Banning single use carrier bags would be clearly aligned with this commitment. Each plastic bag that enters the natural environment poses a significant potential risk to marine, terrestrial and soil ecosystems. Used on average for 20 minutes, they remain in the natural environment for centuries, fragmenting into microplastic particles

¹¹ <https://eia-international.org/wp-content/uploads/Checking-Out-on-Plastics-III.pdf>

¹² <https://eia-international.org/wp-content/uploads/Checking-Out-on-Plastics-III.pdf>

¹³ 8 Lam, S.P. & Chen, J.K. (2006) What Makes Customers Bring Their Bags or Buy Bags from the Shop? A Survey of Customers at a Taiwan Hypermarket. *Environment and Behaviour*, 38, 318-332.

¹⁴ <http://www.adelaidenow.com.au/news/south-australia/plastic-bag-use-still-rife-despite-south-australias-shopping-bag-ban/news-story/a02398d8295da04dcbe04b5343377186?sv=467d4722e2060125ce98c7a555a90d2f>

¹⁵ <https://deframedia.blog.gov.uk/2021/04/19/defras-response-to-calls-for-bags-for-life-charges/>

¹⁶ <https://www.gov.ie/en/organisation/department-of-the-environment-climate-and-communications/?referrer=http://www.dccae.gov.ie/en-ie/environment/topics/waste/litter/plastic-bags/Pages/FAQ%27s.aspx>

¹⁷ Business Waste survey, 2017 reported in: <https://www.edie.net/news/5/Plastic-bag-charge-UK-sustainability-statistics-from-Defra-2017/>

which can cause harm to marine and soil dwelling microorganisms, with potential human health implications if they work their way further up the food chain.¹⁸

Businesses are demonstrating willingness to go further than the government's current approach. For example, supermarket Lidl have removed all single-use carrier bags from their stores, resulting in 26 million fewer plastic bags being sold a year.¹⁹

The government says its rationale for not currently considering an outright ban is that single use carrier bags have a role to play "in spontaneous, unplanned purchasing".²⁰ However, to dismantle the single-use culture underpinning the plastic pollution crisis, it is critical to fundamentally challenge this behaviour and encourage a wholesale shift to reuse on every occasion – including 'unplanned' shopping trips.

For questions or further information please contact Matthew Dawson, Resources and Waste Policy Officer, Wildlife and Countryside Link E: matthew@wcl.org.uk

Wildlife and Countryside Link (Link) is the largest environment and wildlife coalition in England, bringing together 58 organisations to use their strong joint voice for the protection of nature

¹⁸ For example, see Smith, M. et al, 2018. Microplastics in Seafood and the Implications for Human Health, Current Environmental Health Reports, 5:3, p 375-368. Available at: <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s40572-018-0206-z>

¹⁹ <https://www.lidl.co.uk/about-us/lidl-changes-for-the-better/plastics/plastic-reduction>

²⁰ <https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2019-07-19/279388>