

# Briefing

## England's 5p plastic bag charge

From 5 October 2015 all large retailers in England will be required by law to charge customers 5p per single-use plastic carrier bag.

The Government expects this to cut the numbers of plastic bags being taken by up to 80 per cent<sup>1</sup>.

### Key facts

The move starts to bring England into step with the rest of the UK. **Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland** have all introduced their own charges, which have all led to very large reductions in plastic bag use.

Charging for plastic bags has proved to be very **popular and successful** in those parts of the UK that have introduced it – three-quarters of the Welsh public back the charge, five years on from its introduction<sup>2</sup>.

It has demonstrated **no significant net impact on business** (see below).

There are big **economic** benefits. Plastic bags given away free by stores still had to be bought and paid for, and the costs associated with cleaning up discarded bags are significant. The Government expects savings to English councils, shops and the economy to be over £800 million a year<sup>1</sup>. In economic parlance, the impacts on society and the environment of plastic bags are a significant 'externality'.

The charge is not a tax to Government. Retailers are encouraged to donate the money to '**good causes**', and must report back to the Government on where their donations have gone.

**'Bags for life' and paper bags are exempt**, as are some types of bag used for specific purposes (for example, transporting 'live aquatic creatures'). So-called '**biodegradable**' bags are included in the charge.

### Problems with the charge

Evidence from other UK nations shows that English scheme is likely to make a big difference (see below). But the English charge only applies to large retailers. **Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) – retailers employing fewer than 250 staff – are exempt**, although they can apply the charge voluntarily.

This makes little sense. Just under 90 per cent of retailers in Wales say charging 5p per bag has either had a positive or no impact on their business<sup>2</sup>. And the Association of Convenience Stores is supportive:

*"Retailers in Wales are already seeing the benefit of the carrier bag levy ... not only have they been able to save money, but it's also a positive way of having a greater part to play in the community."*

Association of Convenience Stores public affairs director, Shane Brennan (2013)<sup>3</sup>.

**Paper bags** are also exempt, which Friends of the Earth considers to be a mistake. Paper bags have their own resource implications and can still be a big contributor to litter and clean-up costs. The charge will apply to 'biodegradable' bags as well, unlike the charges in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. The Government claims that this is because defining genuine biodegradability is difficult, and that they are hoping to arrive at an "ambitious" definition of biodegradability which could be exempt in future.

## Why charge for plastic bags?

- In **2014 over 7.6 billion plastic bags** were given out by supermarkets in England – roughly 130 per person<sup>1</sup>. The average household has 40 plastic bags stashed away in cupboards or drawers.
- Plastic bags are big contributors to the **littering** of England's streets, hedgerows, waterways and coast. Around 2% of litter on British beaches is plastic bags<sup>4</sup>.
- A major global survey of coastal litter reported in 2010 that 15% of **animals** found dead had become entangled in plastic bags. The stomachs of 94% of all North Sea seabirds contain plastic<sup>5</sup>.
- According to the Campaign to Protect Rural England, plastic bags “may never fully **degrade**; they simply break down into fragments and ultimately into microscopic plastic pieces or plastic dust”<sup>4</sup>.

## Other parts of the UK

- **Wales** introduced a 5p charge on single use plastic bags in 2011. There has been a big reduction in plastic bag usage since, down by 70%<sup>6</sup>. Up to £22 million has been raised in Wales alone for charities and other good causes as a result of the charge.
- **Scotland** brought in a 5p charge in late 2014. In the first six months of its operation alone, usage has fallen by a reported 80%<sup>7</sup>.
- **Northern Ireland's** 5p charge was introduced in April 2013. A drop of nearly 72% was reported the following year<sup>8</sup>. A planned increase to 10p was scrapped as the 5p charge had been so successful.

## What next?

The scheme is likely to lead to big reductions in plastic bag use in England, as it has in the rest of the UK. This is good news. In a climate of deregulation, Government is showing that it is prepared to intervene to finally tackle a problem that retailers have failed to get to grips with voluntarily.

However, **the exemptions for SMEs and paper bags should be removed.**

And plastic bags are just the start. There's a long way to go to get to grips with our waste crisis. Retailers need to be made to **clamp down on unnecessary plastic use throughout their operations** – from the mountains of wrapping that engulfs food, to the over-packaging that accompanies consumer goods.

The bigger picture is that **England is falling far behind other UK nations in its general performance on waste and recycling**. As Welsh and Scottish recycling rates and commitments continue to increase, recycling in England is flatlining, with European targets at risk of being missed<sup>9</sup>.

And the UK Government is playing an obstructive role on the international issues that will really determine how serious we are about ending waste mountains, keeping resources out of landfill and incineration, and moving to a resource-efficient economy. **The Government should be an ambassador for an ambitious new European Circular Economy Package**<sup>10</sup>, which should include tough new targets for recycling across the EU as well as leading a step change in how we reuse, remanufacture and design products.

<sup>1</sup> UK Government, 'Explaining the charge': <http://tinyurl.com/ou56znn>

<sup>2</sup> Guardian, 'Plastic bag use down 70% in Wales since charges began', September 2015, <http://tinyurl.com/oah86yf>

<sup>3</sup> BBC News, 'Plastic bag charged backed by convenience stores', December 2013: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-25399779>

<sup>4</sup> Campaign to Protect Rural England, see <http://tinyurl.com/qcwhdpc>

<sup>5</sup> CleanSea, 'Marine litter and the North Sea', <http://www.cleansea-project.eu/drupal/?q=en/northsea>

<sup>6</sup> Guardian, 'Plastic bag use in Wales plummets due to 5p charge, figures show', July 2012, <http://www.theguardian.com/environment/2012/jul/04/plastic-bag-use-5p-charge>

<sup>7</sup> Guardian, 'Scotland's plastic bag usage down 80% since 5p charge introduced', April 2015: <http://tinyurl.com/lmmlrv>

<sup>8</sup> BBC News, 'Plastic bag use down 72% in Northern Ireland since 5p charge', August 2014: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-28952146>

<sup>9</sup> Guardian, 'Recycling rates in England have stalled', November 2014: <http://www.theguardian.com/environment/2014/nov/18/recycling-rates-in-england-have-stalled>

<sup>10</sup> European Commission, 'Moving towards a circular economy': [http://ec.europa.eu/environment/circular-economy/index\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/environment/circular-economy/index_en.htm)