



The Centre For Business Relationships,
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Comment and Analysis

Carrier Bags: Friend or Foe?

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BRASS

Love them or hate them, plastic bags have become synonymous with our use or waste of resources. Our countryside, rivers and even oceans are often littered by their presence and more than 1 million birds die each year as a result of plastic pollution. The United Nations Environment Programme estimates that there are 46,000 pieces of plastic litter floating in every square mile of ocean. It is estimated that 500 billion plastic carrier bags are used worldwide each year. In the UK alone, each year there are approximately 6.8 billion plastic bags handed out by retail shops (as of 2010).

A huge amount of harmful emissions are emitted during manufacture, shipment and recycling of plastic bags. Even when they photo-degrade in landfill, the plastic from single-use bags never goes away, and toxic particles can enter the food chain and can be ingested by unsuspecting animals.

Paper carrier bags, which are often considered a more environmentally friendly alternative, also have environmental consequences as much of the pulp used for paper shopping bags is virgin pulp because it is considered stronger. Paper production requires hundreds of thousands of gallons of water as well as toxic chemicals like sulphurous acid, which can lead to acid rain and water pollution. Even paper bags that come from a renewable source and are biodegradable require more energy than plastic bags to manufacture and transport.

Between 2006 and 2009, plastic bag use in the UK declined by about 40% to under 6.5 billion, however since the recession, plastic bag use is once again on the increase. The British Retail Consortium has accredited this increase to shoppers changing their method of shopping, with shoppers now making a number of short trips rather than a single big weekly shop. Yet in 2006, shoppers in the UK were taking home approximately 11 billion plastic bags, equating to more than 400 bags per household or 475 million plastic bags a month. Despite, the increase in 2010, UK shoppers are still taking home considerably less plastic bags than 5 years ago. This is part the result of advertising and the styling of canvas and cotton bags, just think of the Anya Hindmarsh and the '*This is not a plastic bag*' cotton bag now regularly resold on eBay.

Earlier this year, the European Commission launched a consultation (which closed in August 2011) on whether the European Union should tax or altogether ban plastic carrier bags, as part of a new consultation designed to tackle rising levels of plastic waste. The consultation also considered options on increasing the visibility of biodegradable packaging products, and boosting the biodegradability requirements for packaging. Evidence from Ireland has shown that a plastic bag levy can actually reduce plastic bag use. When the levy was introduced in Ireland, plastic bag use reduced from an estimated 328 per person to 21 per

person overnight. Other countries, such as Italy, have adopted a more drastic approach by banning the use of certain types of plastic carrier bag.

Plastic bags are banned in San Francisco, South Africa, India, Kenya and a few other countries, whilst their use is restricted in Australia, China, Spain, Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Italy, Switzerland and Ireland.

In the UK, Northern Ireland started a consultation into carrier bag charges in July of 2011, whilst the Scottish Government's consultation began in August 2011. The Mayor of London has also called for the end of free plastic carrier bags from supermarkets. However, it is the Welsh Government that is the first administration in the UK to introduce a mandatory charge for single use carrier bags handed out by retailers in Wales. From the 1st of October 2011, retailers based in Wales and retailers elsewhere in the UK, who deliver goods to someone in Wales, must charge a minimum of 5 pence for both plastic and paper single use carrier bags distributed to the public.

A number of environmentalists, including George Monbiot, argue that restricting plastic bags should not be a priority for Governments because they account for a small proportion of the country's total waste (3.2%) and just 5kg of each individual's annual 12,500kg carbon footprint. The Environment Agency (EA) has also stated that single use carrier bags may not be a waste of resources if re-used responsibly. EA research found that up to 76% of people reuse their carrier bags for example as bin liners, these people will either need to buy bin liners or accept the carrier bag charge.

Therefore, is the Welsh Government focusing on a small scale issue without utilising their new powers to address the bigger problems of industrial or construction waste? Is the Welsh Government yet again focusing on the public, who generate the lowest quantities of waste in Wales, without addressing the industries that generate the greatest quantities of waste? A 1% reduction in municipal waste equates to 16,700 tonnes, whilst a 1% reduction in construction waste equates to nearly the total sum of municipal waste generated in 2006 (over 1 million tonnes). In relation to this charge, although the regulation imposes an obligation on retailers, the financial burden is borne by the public.

The single use carrier bag charge is being introduced into Wales under powers conferred by sections 77 and 90 of, and Schedule 6 to, the Climate Change Act 2008. Retailers will be obligated to charge a minimum of 5 pence for both plastic and paper carrier bags, which fulfil the definition of a 'single carrier' bag. A single-use carrier bag is *"a bag that is not designed for substantial reuse and is often given out with the aim of transporting your goods home for just one trip."* It includes those bags made from plastic, paper, plant based material or natural starch that are not intended for multiple reuse. The definition is not that simple as it really does depend on the composition of the material and the size of the bag and there are a number of exemptions to the definition. Some of the exemptions include: bags which meet specific size specifications and used solely to contain packaged uncooked meat,

poultry or fish; small flat paper bags without a handle (although they can be no greater than 175 mm in width, and no greater than 260 mm in height); small flat plastic bags without a handle (again they must be no greater than 125 mm in width, and no greater than 125 mm in height) and bags which are used solely to contain unpackaged food for human or animal consumption, unpackaged loose seeds, bulbs, corms or rhizome, unpackaged goods contaminated by soil, live aquatic creatures in water and certain medicinal products.

The charge applies to all retailers no matter how many people they employ and not just to those retailers that sell food and groceries and applies to both sales in store and on-line.

All retailers with ten or more employees are required to keep annual records of information relating to the single use carrier bags that they supply and in relation to the proceeds they receive by way of the amount they charge for these bags. Those retailers who pay VAT and provide a 1,000 or more single use carrier bags in the reporting year must publish their records. With increased administrative duties organisations like the CBI have raised concerns about the charge being a costly administrative burden for a number of retailers.

The Welsh Government believes that a charge of 5 pence is sufficient to alter people's behaviour (without putting an unnecessary burden on shoppers) and reduce the quantity of single use carrier bags. In the initial consultation the proposed charge was identified as somewhere between 5 and 15 pence.

The Welsh Government has estimated that it will spend £300,000 to publicise the charge. Recently, an article in the Western Mail highlighted that to date there was a lack of knowledge and understanding about the charge within the retailers who will have to impose the charge from the 1st of October. The article stated that the Welsh Government were sending out a follow-up pack to 40,000 retailers which they should have by the end of August, which means that companies unaware of the charge have only one month to implement the charge, and where relevant record keeping procedures, before the 1st of October. This seems to be a very short lead in time for companies.

Researchers from BRASS will be undertaking research in September to assess the awareness of the charge amongst the public in Wales and whether or not it will affect their use of single use carrier bags or encourage them to reduce their consumption of carrier bags. The research will also consider how companies are implementing the charge and their understanding of the regulation and the supporting guidance.

The findings from the research will be published in October 2011.