



Northern Ireland
Assembly

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Reusable bags

Introduction

The Assembly passed the Single Use Carrier Bags Act (Northern Ireland) in 2011 following a decision by the Northern Ireland Executive to introduce a charge for single use carrier bags in Northern Ireland.

The Department for the Environment (DOE) has suggested the following process:

Phase 1 would use the current Single Use Carrier Bags Act to introduce a 5 pence levy on single use carrier bags by April 2013. The legislation requires that sellers must pass the cost of the levy onto their customers and must forward the revenue generated to the DOE.

The proposals are that the charge should apply to all single use carrier bags – not just plastic. This means the charge would apply to single use carrier bags made of paper and plant-based material or natural starch.

There will be some exemptions. DOE is proposing to follow the Welsh model which is based on grounds such as patient confidentiality (e.g. prescription bags), hygiene, food safety and the protection of goods and consumers. It also allows exemptions for very small bags, mail order packaging and previously used bags. For more information, visit: <http://www.carrierbagchargewales.gov.uk/retailers/bagsnotincluded/?lang=en>¹

¹ There was also a paper prepared for the Environment Committee on the Welsh levy system November 2011.

Phase 2 would see an *increase* in the levy on single use carrier bags to 10 pence per bag from April 2014. It also would see this charge *extended* to include low cost reusable bags.

DOE justifies this extension on environmental grounds to avoid lower cost reusable bags becoming a replacement for single use bags once the levy increases to 10p. The basis for this is the view that environmental impact of these bags being used once and thrown away would be greater than that of single use bags because they are typically made of heavier gauge material.

Reusable Carrier Bags

Reusable carrier bags are designed to be reused several times. They are often made from fabric such as cotton, jute or a thick plastic and are more durable than disposable plastic bags.

One of the most common reusable carrier bags is a 'bag for life' which is replaced free of charge by the retailer once it has worn out.

It is proposed that the carrier bag levy will extend to certain reusable bags from April 2014. Reusable carrier bags sold by retailers above a specific price would be exempt from the levy. In Ireland, where charging is restricted to plastic bags, the threshold is €0.70.²

Details of which reusable bags will be subject to the levy will be published at a later date. It is proposed that the levy will not apply when a worn out bag for life is replaced by a retailer free of charge.³

Environment Agency Report: Life Cycle of a reusable bag⁴

The following types of carrier bag were studied:

- a conventional, lightweight carrier made from high-density polyethylene (HDPE);
- a lightweight HDPE carrier with a prodegradant additive designed to break the down the plastic into smaller pieces; a biodegradable carrier made from a starch-polyester (biopolymer) blend;
- a paper carrier;
- a "bag for life" made from low-density polyethylene (LDPE);
- a heavier more durable bag, often with stiffening inserts made from non woven polypropylene (PP); and
- a cotton bag.

The study found that:

² <http://www.environ.ie/en/Environment/Waste/PlasticBags/>

³ <http://www.rethinkwasteni.org/at-home/reduce/carrierbaglevy/>

⁴ Environment Agency, 2011, Life Cycle Assessment of Supermarket Carrier Bags
http://www.biodeg.org/files/uploaded/Carrier_Bags_Report_EA.pdf

- The environmental impact of all types of carrier bag is dominated by resource use i.e. raw materials and energy during production stages. Transport, secondary packaging and end-of-life management generally have a minimal influence on their performance.
- Whatever type of bag is used, the key to reducing the impacts is to reuse it as many times as possible and where reuse for shopping is not practicable, other reuse, e.g. to replace bin liners, is beneficial.
- The reuse of conventional HDPE and other lightweight carrier bags for shopping and/or as bin-liners is pivotal to their environmental performance and reuse as bin liners produces greater benefits than recycling bags.
- Starch-polyester blend bags have a higher global warming potential and abiotic depletion than conventional polymer bags, due both to the increased weight of material in a bag and higher material production impacts.
- The paper, LDPE, non-woven PP and cotton bags should be reused at least 3, 4, 11 and 131 times respectively to ensure that they have lower global warming potential than conventional HDPE carrier bags that are not reused. The number of times each would have to be reused when different proportions of conventional (HDPE) carrier bags are reused are shown in the table below⁵.

Type of carrier	HDPE bag (No secondary reuse)	HDPE bag (40.3% reused as bin liners)	HDPE bag (100% reused as bin liners)	HDPE bag (Used 3 times)
Paper bag	3	4	7	9
LDPE bag	4	5	9	12
Non-woven PP bag	11	14	26	33
Cotton bag	131	173	327	393

The amount of primary use required to take reusable bags below the global warming potential of HDPE bags with and without secondary reuse

⁵ Environment Agency, 2011, Life Cycle Assessment of Supermarket Carrier Bags
http://www.biodeg.org/files/uploaded/Carrier_Bags_Report_EA.pdf

According to the DoE's 'Rethink Waste Campaign':⁶

- If the 10p levy only applied to single use bags, some consumers could start to treat cheap reusable bags as single use – and discard them irresponsibly. This could cause significant environmental harm.
- The scheme will be administered by the Carrier Bag Levy Administration & Compliance Unit (based in Derry) operating within the Department of Environment.
- The legislation will set out what sellers must do in order to comply with the scheme. The Department will publish detailed guidance, and provide additional help to sellers where necessary. However where sellers fail to achieve compliance, the Department will have powers to require them to remedy this, or to impose fines.
- In order to minimise any potential administrative burden on retailers, it is intended that businesses will make quarterly returns to the Department through a secure online portal. Completing the return should only take a few minutes every 3 months and it is anticipated that retailers will make time savings (in terms of bag orders/deliveries) and financial savings through a substantial reduction in the number of bags they currently distribute free of charge.

Next Steps

Phase 1: Draft Single Use Carrier Bags Charge Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2012

The Department has published a consultation paper seeking views on its specific legislative proposals for a charge on single use carrier bags, which will close the 9th July 2012.⁷

The consultation paper summarises the broad policy direction on carrier bag charging, outlines the Department's specific legislative proposals and includes a copy of the draft Regulations.

The draft Regulations:

- Require sellers to charge customers at least 5p for each single use carrier bag supplied new;
- Require sellers to pay the net proceeds of the charge to the Department, and stipulate how net proceeds should be calculated;
- Make provision for certain exemptions from the charging requirement; and
- Provide for a regime of civil sanctions in the event of breaches of the Regulations.

⁶ <http://www.rethinkwaste.org/at-home/reduce/carrierbaglevy/>

⁷ <http://www.doeni.gov.uk/index/information/foi/recent-releases/publications-details.htm?docid=8631>