



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for the Environment

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Carrier Bags Bill: Departmental Briefing

3 October 2013

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Ms Anna Lo (Chairperson)
Ms Pam Brown (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Cathal Boylan
Mr Tom Elliott
Mr Ian McCrea
Mr Barry McElduff
Mr Ian Milne
Lord Morrow

Witnesses:

Mr Rory O'Boyle	Department of the Environment
Ms Janice Riddell	Department of the Environment
Mr Donald Starritt	Department of the Environment

The Chairperson: I welcome Donald Starritt, from the environmental policy division; Janice Riddell, from the policy division; and Mr Rory O'Boyle, from carrier bag levy team operations. You are very welcome. We are delighted to be here in Derry, where Mr Rory O'Boyle is based. I remind officials that this session is being recorded by Hansard because it is to do with the Bill. You can brief us for five or 10 minutes on how it is going for you and then allow members to ask questions.

Mr Rory O'Boyle (Department of the Environment): Good morning, and thank you for affording us the opportunity to speak to you today. Just to clarify: Janice is the operations manager in the levy team, just in case any flak comes my way, I wanted to make sure that it also comes her way.
[Laughter.]

Ms Janice Riddell (Department of the Environment): Thank you, Rory.

Mr O'Boyle: Again, thanks for the opportunity to provide an update on our work. We have provided you with a detailed briefing on the operational arrangements. You should be aware — I think that you will have got a good feeling from some of the other individuals and stakeholders who have spoken to the Committee in recent weeks — that, to all intents and purposes, the administration and implementation have gone relatively smoothly. With the charging arrangements beginning on 8 April, we have now gone through one quarterly return period, and today we are just beginning the second return period.

The arrangement was to try to make the administrative burden as light as possible on retailers, large and small. We are very happy to report that, in quarter 1, in excess of 85% — almost 90% — of our returns were made online. That gives an insight that people are buying into the mechanism that we

had. You will be aware that the administration team is only one year old almost this week. Putting a new team together with new legislation posed significant challenges, but I think that the input and the levy of returns that we processed in quarter 1 were a great testament to the team.

I also welcome the opportunity to assure you that the levy is being implemented and administered in a very robust, but very sensible, manner. You will be aware that, in the months leading up to the introduction of the levy, the Department had a strong communications campaign in which we worked closely with small and large retailers. We have always been aware that the levy was to be phased in, so, as we sit today, phase 1 is implemented, and we are now starting to give serious consideration to phase 2, which is the subject of some of today's deliberations.

Having read what other stakeholders said, I think that we have developed strong relationships with the retail sector; we have worked very hard to do that. However, it would be remiss of me not to say that had it not been for the sensible approach taken by retailers and consumers, I am not sure whether we would be in the position that we are in today.

I have given you a broad briefing on where we are and what we have done. We are happy to take questions. I reiterate that we are only at the start of a transition period and that significant steps are ahead. We have made significant progress, but we need to build on it.

The Chairperson: Thank you for your presentation and congratulations; I think that you have done well. As you said, the team is only a year old and this was thrown at you quickly. Last week, we met two organisations representing retailers. We got the sense that they were happy with the regulation and the need to do this for environmental reasons. The system seemed to be working for them, as well, in reporting back. However, they queried whether carrying through on the second phase next April is too hasty. How do you feel about that?

Mr Donald Starritt (Department of the Environment): First, we had always intended to go to reusable bags, and I will explain why. Since the levy was introduced, the sale of low-cost reusable bags has rocketed. We do not yet have those figures, but we know, because retailers are telling us, that they have rocketed. To some extent, you would expect that to happen, and one would initially say that those are the very bags that we want people to reuse. However, we are not convinced that they are being reused. Many reusable bags are going out because they are relatively cheap, stronger than a single-use bag and perhaps only a penny dearer. We are very worried about the number of such bags going out.

When we first did our figures, we forecast a 70% increase; however, Wales experienced an increase of 130%. We are gathering figures from the major retailers, on the basis that they are prepared to share those with us. We think that we will leave 130% trailing, but we do not know that for certain yet.

Mr O'Boyle: Donald is right: where we have not specifically gathered figures, some retailers have shared evidence with us — I will not mention the large retailer — that it sold more reusable bags in the week after the levy went live than in the previous year.

The Chairperson: The cheap ones?

Mr O'Boyle: Yes; it is there for all to see. We have written to the large users — there is no statutory obligation on them to provide evidence about the usage of reusable bags — in recent weeks specifically asking them to share information with us because that would be helpful. We will be pleased to feed that back, on the basis that they give us that information.

Mr Starritt: The objective was always to reduce the number of bags in circulation. The job is half done, as we have reduced the number of single-use bags, and we hope to continue reducing it. However, it will remain only half done unless we go to low-cost reusables and encourage people to reuse them. Particularly with supermarket bags for life, it must be borne in mind that people pay for those up front. Once the levy comes, they will pay a little more up front, but then that is it. Those bags will be replaced free of charge every time they wear out. If we achieve that, it will mean fewer sales of such bags for retailers, but the objective of the levy is to reduce the number of bags.

Mr O'Boyle: We have a cadre of staff working with retailers large and small, and we have a designated large-case manager, who is with us today, who works significantly with, and specifically for, large-case users. As Donald said, the feedback from our staff is that there has been an explosion in the use of such bags. If we have figures to support that, we will be happy to share them with you.

Mr Boylan: Thank you very much for the presentation. There are two elements to this: the business element and the consumer element. I can speak only from my experience in my constituency, but people have been very positive about this; there is no doubt about that. My only concern is about the confusion that will reign from paying for a single-use bag. People are buying reusable bags; some of them are up to £1 or whatever. How we get that message across is vital. I think that people would definitely question why that is. That is one element.

The other element is the pressure that will go on business. We heard from two representatives last week. You are still intent on bringing that forward in April. Is there an opportunity to phase it in over a longer period? That would give the consumer more time to absorb what is coming; it would also give business an opportunity to adapt to it. Has any consideration been given to that? That is the bones of last week's presentation.

Mr Starritt: To do that, we would need the Bill to go through the Assembly; we would then need regulations to be affirmed by the Assembly. We have always known that, even with a fair wind, there was a great deal of work to do to make April 2014. Both Ministers — Mr Attwood and now Mr Durkan — have said that they would keep that timetable under review. It depends on how quickly the legislation passes. We recognise that retailers will need time to prepare. However, for policy reasons, it needs to happen as quickly as possible. I am happy to take that back to the Minister.

Mr Boylan: It is all right supporting the industry, but I have concerns about the general public in doing this. They did very well in buying into it, but it is one impact after another. We have done it this year, and we are going to do it next year again. If it was considered over time, it would certainly lend some support to it. I am not saying that everybody will support it, but it is something to consider.

Mr O'Boyle: As Donald said, we can take that back. The go-live date for phase 1 was 8 April. You might wonder where that date came from, as it seems quite strange. The date was derived from the fact that 1 April to 8 April was Easter week. We had representation from retailers that it would have been very unfair of the Department to bring in legislation at one of their busiest times of the year. We listened to them. That is a clear indication of how we have listened to the retail sector and tried to build relationships with it. The 8 April date was derived almost on a consultative basis from having worked with the retail sector.

Mr Boylan: I was mindful not to say this to the business industry last week, but it seems that all types of bags are being sold all over the place. It may not be easy for us to do this, but it is something for consideration. You go into different shops and you get bags at 6p or 10p, and they are saying that they are bags for life or reusable bags. Can we not look at working with the industry to provide a certain type of reusable bag?

Mr Starritt: If the legislation were to go through, the distinction between what constitutes single use and reusable would go; bags with a retail price of below 20p would be subject to the levy. The only place where it will stay will be for a bag for life, where a retailer says, "We will give you a free bag for life. You pay so much for your bag, but we will replace it free of charge." There will be specifications for what constitutes a bag for life. We are due to brief the Committee in the next two weeks. We can go through the detail of that.

The Chairperson: How much are those bags for life?

Mr Starritt: It varies between 5p or 6p and 20p plus.

Mr O'Boyle: One of the dangers — we see evidence of it on the ground — is almost a high-scale substitution effect, whereby a customer would be inclined to buy a cheaper reusable bag at 5p or 6p, ideally because they thought that they were getting greater value. Our statistics show that only 56% of people reuse those bags. That is a disaster for us because it is a significant substitution effect, and those bags are going to landfill much more quickly.

I share the member's thoughts that there is a very positive message here. As I said earlier, implementing the levy was a phased approach. We have plans to promote this. One of the main reasons for the success of last year's awareness campaign for the levy was the "free media" that we got. "Free media" is events such as this. This time last year, people were talking about the difference between paper and plastic. Was paper in? Was plastic out? What was in, and what was out?

Ms Riddell: When is a bag not a bag?

Mr O'Boyle: Yes. The customer has become more discerning and more aware, and the ongoing debate is helping us to raise awareness. However, I agree that we have work to do to make the Department's rationale clear to customers. We have a communications plan in place. The large retailers would say — I think that the small retailers would agree — is that we had a very successful communications campaign last year.

Lord Morrow: Some of my questions have been answered, but there are two aspects that I would like to hear the panel on. First, the new bag, which I suppose you might call a stage up from a plastic bag. Is it inevitable that we will produce another type of disposable bag of little or no value that will start littering the countryside like the plastic bag before it?

Secondly, you mentioned Wales. Was there any hint on the horizon that that could be a problem for them? Is there any possibility that the new scenario will encourage, in some way, a black market here to produce bags that, at least on the fact of it, will be environmentally friendly but which, at the end of the day, are not? Are we perhaps moving from one type of problem to another?

Mr Starritt: There may be three points there. The main purpose of putting the levy on the low-cost reusable is to increase the economic worth of the bag. Let us take the scenario where we do not do it, and we have a 5p single-use bag and a 5p or 6p low-cost reusable bag. Very soon, people have started to accept, if you like, the 5p level. They go to the shop and will pick the best bag, which will be the low-cost reusable. Some — not as many as now, but some — will discard that bag prematurely, and that will give us our problem. That is why we are imposing the levy: to increase the worth and to encourage reuse. Yes, it will mean a wee bit more first off, but if it is a bag for life it will be replaced free of charge.

As for the Welsh experience, I am not aware completely that anyone has said that they are going to low-cost reusables. However, some of our colleagues in Wales — and in Scotland — are looking with interest at what we are doing and why we are doing it. We anticipate that they will be looking at their policy, but I cannot say that they are going that direction just yet.

The other point was a possible black market in bags. Any bag that appears in a store and is sold for anything less than 20p will have to have the levy applied to it, regardless of where it is sourced. England is considering exempting a certain type of biodegradable bag, and we will keep an eye on what happens there. Going back to the underlying policy objective to cut unnecessary bags, regardless of what they are made from, our concern is that there is a certain amount of myth about biodegradability. Bags will biodegrade if they are disposed of properly; if not, they will litter streets for a considerable time.

Lord Morrow: I once had the rare experience of walking past a boutique and being hollered in. That was a new experience for me. *[Laughter.]* I was looking for the exit door the whole time. However, the person who has that boutique has a very upmarket bag that she gives to ladies who buy their finery there. She was very critical of the fact that this bag could not be used. She gave me three samples to take home. I do not know why three, but that is by the way.

She said that those bags were costing her from £2 to £4. Yet, they would not be deemed biodegradable, and she had a dilemma. She also complained that — I would like to hear you on this point — it could encourage theft. I think that I raised this before. It was one of these shopping malls where you can walk through from one to the other without ever going outside; and some people come through with garments over their arm. I was told, "It would be quite easy for that person to lift another garment". The person was not doing that, but she said that her concern was about the potential of that happening in future. Have you any evidence of that from the retailers that you have been talking to?

Mr O'Boyle: It would be remiss of me not to say that some small retailers have raised issues with us in relation to the potential for theft. However, we have no strong evidence that there has been a spike as a result of the introduction of charging for carrier bags. This morning, I told a retailer who lives in the city that I was going to be speaking to you today and asked him what he wanted me to tell the Committee. His is a medium-sized store, and he said, "You should tell our elected representatives that the savings that I am making on a monthly/quarterly basis are more than £1,000 a month because I do not have to purchase carrier bags". He said, "I think that the levy has been very successful".

I asked him about shoplifters and he said, "Let's be honest, Rory, if a customer wants to shoplift, he will shoplift irrespective of carrier bags". Again, we have no strong anecdotal evidence to gauge that or to suggest that there has been a spike in shoplifting. In our discussions with them, the large retailers said something similar.

Lord Morrow: I take the point that someone who is bent will remain so and will continue to do what they always have. However, we do not want to make it easier for him. That is all that I am saying.

Mr Starritt: A study in Ireland after its plastic bag levy came in looked at shoplifting and identified a slight increase. However, it later fell back to, more or less, the previous levels. It is potentially a factor for a while; however, it was not felt to be a significant one.

Ms Brown: Thank you for your presentation. Donald kind of answered the question that I was going to ask. I was going to raise the fact that the Northern Ireland Local Government Association (NILGA) had talked about all plastic bags being biodegradable. I still think that there is probably merit in that idea, particularly given that the food industry — chippies and that — are exempt from the levy. That is the type of bag that you will find, more than any others, stuck in trees and bushes because of people eating on the run. There is still merit, although I take your point that how they are disposed of is what makes them biodegradable.

Mr Starritt: The Department's view is that, to the extent that people are going to buy single-use bags — some people will — we would obviously much rather that those bags were biodegradable. It will be about how we tackle that issue. If we were to create an exemption for biodegradable bags, manufacturers would simply switch to that type of bag and our usage figures would go up again. There may be another way around this. Perhaps it can be taken into account when we review our policy, which we are required to do. In fact, our proposals are to tighten the review clauses; so, I think that we will look at this off and on for some time.

Ms Brown: I am thinking more about biodegradable bags just for those who are exempt, in an attempt to cut down on plastic.

Mr Starritt: Yes. It would need to be along those lines.

Ms Brown: I like the way things are now. It has changed the shopping experience. This is probably a male/female thing: a man does not want to be walking about with a nice big bag, such as Maurice requires, over their shoulder. It is not a look that they want. I think that the males are the ones who want something that they can get easily and get rid of easily. Women do not mind going in with a big hessian bag.

Mr O'Boyle: The levy has definitely engendered a challenge to bag producers. They are looking at a whole range of bag types. You will probably see on the market the small bag that rolls up and can be put in your pocket. That might take away the bad look from males. I am always very conscious of having a bag with me in case somebody snaps me coming out of a shop with a plastic bag. I always have one in my pocket.

Ms Riddell: Operationally, we have taken the view that all those types of paper bags are not exempt from the levy. There was such a vast range at the beginning of April; people were coming in with different types of bags, and every time we met a retailer, we were being asked whether certain bags were in or out. We have adopted a consistent and uniform approach to the exemption when it comes to designer bags, which are all really paper.

Ms Brown: More of a campaign on the issue could clarify things.

I cannot remember what shop I was in, but I was asked whether I would like to buy a hessian bag for a children's charity for £1. It is much easier to give your pound when it is not going to the shop to make profit from, whatever type of bag it is —

Lord Morrow: Did it ease the pain of parting?

Ms Brown: Yes; it was knowing that the money was going to a children's charity. It was also advertised on the bag what it was for. That might be a good way to sell a bag to a man.

Mr Boylan: Are we not allowed to use designer bags? *[Laughter.]*

The Chairperson: Are the exemptions on the list still the same? Are we still talking about the levy not applying to bags for hot food and raw meat?

Mr Starritt: There are no changes to those.

Mr O'Boyle: It might be useful to give you some anecdotal evidence. Without doubt, when the levy went live, there was some confusion, as you have alluded to, about some exemptions. We had particular difficulties with the butchery sector. There was a general feeling that butchers were totally exempt. Again, this was more about education about that. Within a very short space of time of the levy going live, we received a significant number of calls from butchers. We did a special exercise and wrote to butchers. I think that our customer relations managers visited 96% of the butchers in Northern Ireland. A specific type of smaller bag that they can use is exempt. They had issues about food safety, so we worked closely with the Food Standards Agency, which produced a letter for district councils. There was a specific incident that we were able to deal with by working with other Departments and agencies.

The Chairperson: As Pam said, the bags that you can put raw meat into should be biodegradable. People should use those rather than the plastic ones that will last for 2,000 years.

Mr Elliott: Thanks very much for the presentation. My question is about the link with traders and retailers. You said that you do not have all the information back from retailers, except from those who decided to share it with you at this stage. How much discussion do you have or intend to have with retailers on that?

Rory, you mentioned one retailer who you spoke to in the city here this morning and who seemed to be quite positive about the scheme. He said that it is saving him £1,000 per month and that if people want to shoplift, they will shoplift anyway. I do not agree with that. Although I accept that if people are determined to shoplift, they will do so, but if you make it easier for them, more will be inclined to do it.

I take the point about saving £1,000 per month on the purchase of plastic bags. However, a lot of smaller retailers where I am from in Fermanagh and South Tyrone would indicate that they found, certainly at the start, that many more people were buying less. They bought just what they could carry out to the car, so they were spending only £10 as opposed to £30. That proved to be quite a reduction in their sales for a period, so I do not agree with all that your retailers are telling you.

You said that you had figures showing that only 56% of people reuse the reusable bags. Where did that figure come from or how did you get it?

Mr Starritt: The figure came from an independent survey by Millward Brown in June. I think the question was whether people regularly reused bags. We are trying to establish whether that has become a pattern.

Mr O'Boyle: We communicate with retailers large and small in a range of ways and through a range of mediums. We have customer relations staff on the ground who have had a significant one-to-one interface with retailers. We took the opportunity to engage with retail sectoral groups, from the Northern Ireland Independent Retail Trade Association to the Ballyhackamore traders' association and city centre managers. That process is ongoing. The next major group that we will speak to is the Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action, which is having a seminar for charity retailers in Northern Ireland. We will have somebody going to that next week.

We continue to build relationships, and that is important for us. I have a strong sense that, as the operational team, we are the Department's eyes and ears. We are on the ground, so it is important for us to get a strong feel about what is going on and feed that back into the process. I am not holding my local retailer up as a bastion of society but in relation to your point about people shopping less, he said that in a store of his size he gets to know his customers. He probably agrees that people take less, but he said that could be an individual who, before the levy, would have come to his shop twice a week. He now sees him coming in five or six times a week. There is evidence on both sides, but that is a one-off, so I could not say that it is the case throughout Northern Ireland.

The Chairperson: They buy less but come more frequently.

Mr Starritt: That is one example.

Mr Elliott: I am not so sure that that is great for the environment, particularly if you live in a rural area and have to drive a car every time you want to go to a shop for a loaf.

On the issue of continued relationships and discussions with traders, whether large or small; how much of that will be based on getting definitive evidence? We had the traders in front of us last week, and some of them said that they had found an 85% reduction in bag use. Others said that they had 97% or 98%, which is very high. At some stage, will you collate a reasonably accurate picture of where we are?

Mr O'Boyle: Some of you may have seen the Department's answer to a recent freedom of information request. I think that the journalist jumped to conclusions and produced figures that, to me, were totally inaccurate. The Department wants to be very clear that if it gives you any figures, they are validated. We have some figures from the first quarter. However, we need to factor in seasonal variations. In the first quarter, we had a week for which we had no returns at all, because Easter week was not in there. In this quarter, we had the fleadh in the city and the World Police and Fire Games. So, it is probably conceivable that consumption might go up.

Christmas comes into the next quarter, so we plan to produce statistics at the end of the year when we have a clear and full picture of what the four quarters look like. We can then say that those statistics are validated, and that will enable us to look at the trends and stand over them. Until then, I think that we would be treading a difficult and dangerous path in jumping to conclusions on figures. We certainly see trends emerging from small to medium-sized businesses. We are quite different from Wales, with which, as we said, we have had some discussions. Retailers in Wales have to publish their figures. They do not have to make a return to the Department; they publish them on their website. When we get in quarterly returns, we can collate them and, once validated, we can provide them to you as validated statistics.

Mr Starritt: The other difficulty we have in forecasting percentage reductions is that there is a level of uncertainty about the baseline; in other words, how many bags were in circulation before the levy came in. The figure of 300 million that we had is an estimate. It might be too high; we think it more likely to be slightly low. What we are really about now is trying, as Rory said, to gather our own figures. By the end of the year, we will know how many bags were issued in Northern Ireland. So, we are producing our own statistics.

The Chairperson: It will give you a baseline as well.

Mr O'Boyle: As of today, roughly 18 million bags were dispensed in the first quarter. As of 5.00 pm yesterday, the revenue we gleaned in the first quarter was just short of £908,000.

The Chairperson: That is a far cry from the £4 million that we were thinking of. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Boylan: But, Chair, this was for a quarter.

The Chairperson: It is the £4 million per year that I am thinking of.

Mr Starritt: The figures are higher than we had anticipated. We knew that, in the first year, we probably forecasted figures for the year, for just single-use bags, at around the £2 million mark.

The Chairperson: I was thinking of £1.5 million. I remember that figure.

Mr Starritt: We had different figures — £1.5 million net would be right. The £900,000 that Rory talked about is gross.

The Chairperson: From how many quarters — two?

Mr O'Boyle: One.

The Chairperson: Not good enough.

Mr O'Boyle: We would say that that is because we are doing a great job. *[Laughter.]* The net admin costs associated with that would be around £120,000 or £125,000.

Lord Morrow: Are you working with retailers across the whole Province on this or is it condensed in one area?

Mr O'Boyle: As I said, we have a team of customer relations managers who are deployed the length and breadth of Northern Ireland. Each of them has been allocated a geographical area.

We have had a range of queries from small and large retailers. I can provide the Committee with an assurance today that, where we have had any queries from retailers, we have been able to have a customer relations manager go out and see that individual within three days. I think that that provides a very high level of service.

Lord Morrow: Can I get them up to that boutique that I was talking about? *[Laughter.]*

Ms Riddell: At the very beginning of the levy, when it went live in April, we had around 1,800 phone calls in the first three months. A lot of them were around exemptions from the levy but people were also seeking one of the customer relations managers to visit them to distinguish whether their bags were exempt. As Rory said, in that first three month period, the customer relations managers tried to get out within those times when they got a phone call.

The Chairperson: Do you go out to do spot checks to see whether people are complying with the legislation?

Mr O'Boyle: Perhaps this is something that Janice could pick up on. Again, despite some of the horror stories and scaremongering that has been going on in the press, I gave you a very clear assurance at the outset that the levy was being administered and implemented on a very robust basis. Janice can outline where we see ourselves at the moment.

Ms Riddell: Operationally, there are a number of ways in which we would make an assessment of whether a retailer was complying. Mostly, at the moment, it is through structured visits with the customer relations managers, but it will also be through monitoring the quarterly returns. Before we would consider any formal enforcement activity in relation to the levy, senior management would have to be satisfied that a number of key stages have taken place. I would expect that the customer relations manager would have visited a retailer and seen that he was not charging. There would have been an observation, a visit, and then on the foot of that observation visit, I would expect to see some demonstration of an educational role between the customer relations manager the retailer.

If the retailer was not on the premises, our customer relations manager would leave a letter including a time frame of 21 days for a follow-up visit. If, after that, they found that the retailer was not complying, I or Rory would visit the premises. It would only be after that time, and if the retailer would continue not to commence charging arrangements, that we would feel it necessary to start formal enforcement action. In doing that, the customer relations managers would have to present the case to us, documenting that previous case history. In taking that staged approach to enforcement, I feel that we are very in line with the best principles of good enforcement.

For me, it is really about providing a consistent and uniform approach across Northern Ireland. I want to see that a customer relations manager who has dealt with a retailer in Fermanagh is dealing exactly the same way in Ballymena, to give that consistent approach.

At the minute, we have undertaken in excess of 1,000 visits by customer relations managers since the levy went live, and all those visits are documented and recorded in our internal carrier-bag levy database. So, the history of that retailer, if a visit has been undertaken, is recorded, and, if we were going to take any formal enforcement activity, that is what we would look at when we got there.

Mr O'Boyle: You will recall that we brought our enforcement guidance to the Committee before we went live. We were very clear that the model of enforcement that we wanted to have was a relationship model where we wanted to build relationships with retailers. I think that had we have gone out with all guns blazing, making a massive amount of test purchases, you would be asking me today why we had done that. We said that we were going to have a relationship model of enforcement and I think that the approach we are taking has been very measured.

It would be remiss of me not to say that we have had significant assistance from other Departments in looking at enforcement and in looking at the levy and how we enforce it. Our colleagues in Northern Ireland Trading Standards Service, which has no responsibility for administration of the levy, have been exceptionally helpful to us.

Ms Riddell: To the team, and to Rory and me, success in relation to our resources and our time is compliance with the levy, which therefore negates the need at all for any enforcement action. That is what success looks like to us.

The Chairperson: You have been working very hard, then.

Mr Boylan: Are you officially the plastic bag police — the CSI team? *[Laughter.]*

Ms Riddell: We are the single-use bag police.

Mr O'Boyle: One of the retail groups called us the carrier bag police. I am not sure how we will manage that.

Ms Riddell: In April, when we were out and about talking to different people and organisations, such as the Northern Ireland Chamber of Commerce, we were asked; "Will it be like it was with the cigarettes? Will we know that you are coming?" We made it clear to all the people we visited that we would not be sending a letter to a premises telling people that we would be coming to see if they were dispensing bags. That will just not happen, and they know that. The whole essence of providing those briefings was to educate and advise them that our customer relations manager could be in their store at any time observing their behaviour.

The Chairperson: And buying goods from them.

Ms Riddell: Exactly.

Mr Boylan: We imagine a SWAT team landing at the door.

Mr O'Boyle: We have been called worse than the carrier bag police, but that is not for today.

Lord Morrow: The worst that you could be called is VAT inspectors. *[Laughter.]*

Mr I McCrea: We have all heard the other names that you have been called.

I apologise for missing your presentation. The car-parking situation out there is absolutely abysmal, I will not go any further than that, but I probably said a whole lot worse when I was in the car trying to get a parking space this morning. This is an important issue, and I am a wee bit disappointed that I missed the presentation.

At the Committee last week, the Northern Ireland Retail Consortium referred to an eight-month to one-year training period that would be needed if the bags-for-life levy were to be implemented. Have you had any discussions with retailers about that requirement? I presume that they have a reason for it, but why it would take eight months or a year to train somebody to add that levy? I have my own opinion on the policy, but what is your view on that requirement?

Mr Starritt: The same period was mentioned to us. We did ask about it, but I have to say that we still do not quite understand why it would take so long. When we were introducing the single-use bag charge, we were told that retailers needed, as a minimum, a three-month implementation period, which, as it turned out, is what we had. I can understand that they want time to prepare, but I am not sure that it would take as long as that.

Mr I McCrea: Explain to me and the Committee what the retailers need to do to implement this levy.

Mr Starritt: They need to re-programme their tills and train their staff.

Mr O'Boyle: I cannot speak for retailers, but the evidence from some of the discussions that we have had is that, when a lot of the large retailers introduced the levy in Northern Ireland, they already had a

model in place from Wales. It was almost a simple read across. What they are saying now — and this issue was also raised by the carrier bag stakeholder group — is that it would take significantly longer to phase out their systems and bring in new systems. They also raised issues in relation to the training of staff, but it does seem like an inordinate amount of time.

The Department has always been aware that it will be a phased approach. To all intents and purposes, we are still proceeding on the basis that the levy will be introduced in April. We have our communications plan in place. If April is given the go ahead, we will be ready to roll with what we have planned.

The Chairperson: Could the long period be explained by the fact that the very big supermarkets have a lot of part-time staff?

Mr Starritt: We are partly guessing what retailers' concerns are. With the single-use bag levy, one of their concerns was that they did not want their checkout staff to have to take the flak for the Department's charge.

Addressing that issue was a lot about having posters up around the store to let people know that the charge was coming in and that it was a government-imposed levy. I can see why retailers would want a three- to four-month period, but I am not so sure why they would need longer. This levy will affect the bigger retailers more than the smaller ones, because it is the bigger retailers that sell the bags for life.

The Chairperson: OK. We have no more questions for you.

Mr Boylan: There are specific questions at page 119 of our packs that have not been dealt with. Perhaps we could send those to the Department and get a written response.

The Chairperson: OK, that is fine. Thanks very much indeed.