

The 'Single-Use Plastic Carrier Bags Charge' was introduced in England on the 5<sup>th</sup> of October 2015. Until May 2021, this meant that all large retailers were legally required to charge 5 pence for all single-use plastic bags; however, the policy has since been extended to include all retailers, and the price doubled to 10p.

The charge's objective is simple: it "aims to reduce the use of single-use carrier bags, and the litter associated with them, by encouraging people to re-use bags" (Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs, 2021). This came in response to growing concerns regarding the adverse effects of plastic bag usage, chiefly the number of them ending up as highly visible litter, the clean-up of which was estimated to cost taxpayers around £10 million in 2013. (Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs, 2013)

The initiative sought to rectify this by acting as a targeted behavioural incentive, forcing consumers to more actively consider their usage of single-use plastic bags. It has been highly successful in this regard; in 2014, it was reported that the main retailers in England had issued over 7.5 billion single-use plastic bags (Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs, 2015) – almost 140 per person. However, in the reporting year 2022-2023, this figure had been brought down by over 98% to 133 million (Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs, 2023) – closer to 2 per person for the year. Moreover, the charge is not a tax, and so the government recommend that retailers donate the money it raises; this means that the charge "has generated nearly £190 million for good causes" (Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs, 2023).

However, critics of the policy argue that its scope is far too limited, pointing most notably to the increasing uptake of 'bags for life' as a direct replacement for traditional, single-use, plastic bags. 'Bags for life' are comprised of a thicker, more durable material, making them designed for greater reuse and longevity, yet "more than 1.58 billion were issued in 2019, a 4.5% increase compared to 2018." (Environmental Investigation Agency & Greenpeace, 2021) This is proving problematic as the typical 'bag for life' "can contain more than three times as much plastic as a single-use carrier". (BBC Wildlife Magazine, 2019)

It might therefore be argued that the government's focus on *single-use* carrier bags has led not to decreased plastic consumption, but rather shifting patterns of bag distribution to evade legislation. A solution to this problem might therefore be to increase the price of 'bags for life'. Polling on this matter was conducted in Jersey, as in June 2020 it enacted an outright ban on single-use plastic bags, and it was ultimately concluded that the appropriate price was around 70p (Government of Jersey, 2020); enough to further discourage consumers from making the purchase, but not so much as to make them entirely unaffordable, especially for low-income groups.

I believe that the change would be highly effective if implemented across the UK, given that it would not be too much of a departure from the current policy: it could be implemented relatively easily and would likely yield the same benefits as the original charge, namely, "generating a decrease in the production and sale of plastic bags overall, while avoiding significant impacts on the relevant economic sectors". (Sílvia et al., 2020)

### ***Works Cited:***

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