

Report on	Consultation on proposed changes to the NI Carrier Bag Levy
Date of Meeting	5 th July 2021
Reporting Officer	Mark McAdoo, Head of Environmental Services
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Is this report restricted for confidential business?	Yes	
If 'Yes', confirm below the exempt information category relied upon	No	X

1.0	Purpose of Report
1.1	To seek approval to submit a response to the consultation on the NI Carrier Bag Levy.
2.0	Background
2.1	The Department for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA) have published a consultation on the Carrier Bag Levy in Northern Ireland (NI). The Department has taken the decision to consult on changes to The Single Use Carrier Bags Charge Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2013 in order to build and enhance the existing legislation.
2.2	The consultation opened on 1 st June and the deadline for responses is 27 th July 2021.
3.0	Main Report
3.1	The levy in NI is the most extensive of carrier bag levies across the UK; it applies to all bags; not just single use and plastic bags. The proceeds are collected and processed by DAERA and used to both promote and sustain the wider NI environmental sector.
3.2	The 5 pence levy was introduced in April 2013 and initially applied only to single use bags. The scope of the levy was extended in January 2015 and is currently applicable to all bags with a retail price of less than 20 pence (the charging threshold). The primary objective of the levy is to influence customer behaviour to promote a significant reduction in bag usage. Published annual usage statistics for the existing levy show that the introduction of the levy across NI in 2013 had a significantly positive impact, reducing carrier bag use by 73.2% from the 2012 baseline figure of 300 million carrier bags.
3.3	While statistics also show a year on year decrease in overall bag usage since the introduction of the levy, the Department is now concerned that the volume of heavy duty carrier bags entering the NI retail and supply sector are not being reused and, regrettably, will often end up in landfill sites. So whilst it is clear that the existing levy has been successful, the Department now intends reviewing the related legislation.
3.4	In the seven years of existence in NI the levy has generated proceeds in excess of £32m which has subsequently been reinvested to support a broad range of local and country wide environmental projects. While the levels of funding have varied to support small, medium and large projects many of these initiatives have been funded through the NI

	Environment Fund, which enables not for profit organisations and councils to deliver key environmental interventions.
3.6	Across the NI retail sector many retailers have already taken steps to reduce the use of single use carrier bags by withdrawing them completely from circulation, replacing them with thicker bags which they designate as reusable. While this is to be commended and it is clear that significant progress has been made in reducing the use of single use bags, it should be recognised that further proactive and preventative action can be taken to continue to reduce usage of bags of all materials and protect our natural environment.
3.7	DAERA statistics and related trend analysis show that there has already been a move away from using single use bags across NI since the levy was introduced in 2013. These statistics show that 95% of bags dispensed in 2014/15 were those identified as single use carrier bags, compared to only 48% in 2019/20, a significant drop of 47%. While this reduction is encouraging, it should be recognised that a 48% usage figure still represents a high number of single use carrier bags which are in circulation and a significant change in consumer behaviour is still required to encourage further reductions.
3.8	Field based research clearly evidence that heavier, thicker bags, which are significantly more harmful to the environment, have become the main bag dispensed by retailers in NI (making up 52% of the figures available for the latest annual validated statistics). This clearly demonstrates that these heavier thicker bags have now become the new “throw away” bag as they are not being reused as often as was originally intended. These bags are significantly more harmful to the environment and further action is needed to address this potentially negative trend which represents a significant and increased environmental risk and also potentially threatens the ongoing successful impact of the levy.
3.9	Also carrier bags continue to contribute to the litter on our streets and a survey by Keep Northern Ireland Beautiful funded by DAERA in 2019ii, found that there were 1.3 million pieces of litter on our streets at any one time equating to 28 tonnes of rubbish resulting in an annual clean-up bill of £45 million. A total of 71% of all waste collected was made up of plastics, part of which, although significantly less than previously, is from plastic bags. Any reduction in carrier bags being provided to consumers in shops will reduce the overall litter on our streets and save money in cleaning throughout NI.
3.10	<p>The impact of carrier bags made from other materials also needs to be addressed. The Carrier Bags Act (Northern Ireland) 2014 amended the term ‘single use carrier bag’ to ‘carrier bag’ and extended the levy in NI to bags of all materials. This along with a number of other factors would point to the need to re-evaluate the current Carrier Bag levy policy incorporating changes to the list of exemptions, including the pricing threshold and the current charge. Proposals outlined in the consultation are therefore as follows:</p> <p>A - Proposal to increase the levy on all carrier bags to a minimum of either 20 pence or 25 pence.</p> <p>B - Proposal to simplify exemptions by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Removing the exemption for bags which are sold to customers for a sum of not less than 20 pence each.</i> • <i>Removing the exemption for gusseted liners used to line or cover boxes, crates or other containers of a similar nature.</i> • <i>Removing the exemption for bags used on board ships, trains, aircraft, coaches, buses and in areas designated as security restricted (with the exception of Security Tamper Evident Bags (STEB)).</i>

3.11	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Removing the exemption for bags made wholly from paper with no gusset or handle and with maximum dimensions of 175mm x 260mm.</i> • <i>Removing the exemption for bags made wholly from plastic, with no gusset or handle with maximum dimensions of 125mm x 125mm.</i> • <i>Removing the exemption for bags made wholly from paper, with no handle with maximum dimensions of 80mm (wide) x 50mm (gusset width) x 155mm (height).</i> • <i>Introducing an exemption for bags of any material with no handle, to include a gusset width no greater than 50mm and maximum dimensions of 125mm x 155mm</i> <p>In addition to the changes being proposed above the Department are reserving any decision on the current exemptions for bags used to contain hot foods or hot drinks intended for consumption away from the premises on which they are sold and intend to revisit this in line with their current Single Use Plastics and Green Growth strategies.</p>
4.0	Other Considerations
4.1	Financial, Human Resources & Risk Implications
	Financial: None
	Human: None
	Risk Management: None
4.2	Screening & Impact Assessments
	Equality & Good Relations Implications: The consultation includes an Equality & Disability Duties Screening Template
	Rural Needs Implications: The consultation includes a Rural Needs Impact Assessment (RNIA) Template
5.0	Recommendation(s)
5.1	Members are requested to approve the submission of a response to the NI Carrier Bag Levy consultation and to provide their views on whether to support the proposals to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> (a) increase the levy on all carrier bags to a minimum of 20 or 25 pence. (b) simplify exemptions by amending the exemptions as outlined
6.0	Attachment(s)
6.1	Consultation document on proposed changes to the Carrier Bag Levy