



Briefing for the Public Petitions Committee

Petition Number: [PE1535](#)

Main Petitioner: Alexander Fraser

Subjects: Calls on the Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to:

- make teaching sustainability and the environment mandatory in secondary schools; and
- ban all disposable plastic bags in supermarkets and shops to aid the environment.

Background

Teaching Sustainability in Secondary Schools

The Scottish school curriculum is not statutory, but is set out in guidance. "[Experiences and Outcomes](#)" cover education from pre-school to S3.

Sustainability and environmental issues are included in the curriculum under:

- Energy sources and sustainability under 'Planet Earth'
- People, places and environment under 'Social Studies'
- Technological development in society under technologies.

For example, one of the purposes of the 'technologies' curriculum is for children to: "be capable of making reasoned choices relating to the environment, to sustainable development and to ethical, economic and cultural issues."

Scottish Government Action: School Curriculum

In March 2013, the Scottish Government published "Learning for Sustainability: The Scottish Government's response to the Report of the One Planet Schools Working Group." A [Learning for Sustainability Implementation Group](#), was asked to take forward the 31 recommendations of the [Learning for Sustainability Report](#) (2012) on embedding LfS in school education. The group is convened by the Scottish Government and began work in February 2014.

Plastic Bags

According to [data](#) published by the Waste Resources Action Programme (WRAP) 800 million thin-gauge carrier bags were supplied by supermarkets in Scotland in 2013. This equates to 12.6 bags per capita per month.

A number of concerns have been raised about the environmental impacts of carrier bags. Zero Waste Scotland [note](#) that:

“We need to reduce our use of carrier bags if we are to improve our environment, as they are a visible aspect of litter and a blight on our landscape.”

The RSPB Scotland has previously [stated](#) that:

“In addition to their implications for resource use and climate change, single-use carrier bags can cause direct damage to the natural environment, particularly wildlife such as seabirds and marine mammals

However the Packaging and Films Association have disagreed with the focus on carrier bags and [state](#) that:

“This political fixation with carrier bags ignores the scientific evidence (Environment Agency Science Report SC030148) of their impacts by comparison with alternatives which taxes or levies on lightweight plastic bags encourages and is frequently justified as the product is said to be linked to a throw away consumer mentality.”

Many [initiatives](#) around the world have sought to reduce plastic bag use. Examples include both taxes on bags and banning single use bags. Bhutan, Kenya and Rwanda have banned plastic bags. Denmark introduced a tax on plastic bags in 1994 as part of a wider tax on packaging. In October 2011, the [Welsh Government](#) introduced a 5 pence charge on the supply of new single use carrier bags and in April 2013 [Northern Ireland](#) similarly introduced a 5p charge for new single use carrier bags.

In 2011, the European Commission [consulted](#) on measures to reduce plastic bag use. The consultation sought views on a range of options including a levy and an EU-level ban. In November 2013, the Commission adopted a [proposal](#) to reduce the consumption of plastic bags. The proposal requires member states to take measures to reduce the use of lightweight plastic bags. Member states can choose which measures they adopt to achieve this – including charges, national reduction targets, marketing approaches etc. The accompanying [memo](#) does state, however, that member states could ban plastic bags should certain conditions be met.

Scottish Parliament Action: Plastic bags

Members' Bill

On 17th June 2005, Mike Pringle MSP introduced a [Members' Bill](#) - the Environmental Levy on Plastic Bags (Scotland) Bill. The Bill stated that its aim was to reduce the number of plastic bags in the waste stream as litter or in landfill site and to raise a general awareness of the environmental issues of reduce, recycling and reusing waste.

The Bill proposed:

- placing a levy on specified plastic bags to be paid for by the customer;
- requiring those who provide such plastic bags to pass the amount collected to the local authority in whose area they are operating;
- requiring local authorities to enforce the collection of the levy;
- ring fencing the money raised by the levy to be spent on environmental projects.

The Scottish Parliament's Environment and Rural Development Committee [considered](#) the bill in autumn 2005, sought some further information on several aspects and subsequently [concluded](#) that:

"...it remains impossible to be definitive about the likely environmental impact of the Bill and the arguments about whether this will be a net positive benefit are very finely balanced. The Committee considers that, on its own, the Bill cannot achieve the obvious and unequivocal benefits that it intends...The Committee considers that a levy has most potential as part of a strategy, and considers that the Executive has the power to promote measures which would achieve the impact of the Bill without the unintended consequences."

The Bill was withdrawn on 24 October 2006.

Scottish Government Action: Plastic bags

Following the withdrawal of the Environmental Levy on Plastic Bags (Scotland) Bill the Scottish Government [said](#):

"We are also working with DEFRA, WRAP (Waste and Resources Action Programme) and UK retailers on a code of practice to reduce the number of bags given to consumers. I hope that retailers will agree to ambitious targets to reduce substantially bag use.

"I would strongly urge retailers to sign up to the voluntary code and I'd expect to see progress shortly. If agreement cannot be reached, then legislation may have to be considered."

In 2008 the Scottish Government hosted a “[Supermarket Summit](#)” in 2008. At this summit retailers agreed to a target of reducing carrier bag use by 50 per cent by Spring 2009. In July 2009 the Scottish Government announced that participating supermarkets had reduced the number of carrier bags supplied by 49% compared to May 2006. Subsequent to this voluntary approach to reducing carrier bag use [data](#) published by WRAP found that thin-gauge plastic bag use increased by 7% in Scotland between 2010 and 2013.

Legislative Powers to Charge

The power to charge for carrier bags derives from Section 88 of the [Climate Change \(Scotland\) Act 2009](#). The Act provides Scottish Ministers with the powers, by regulation, to:

- require suppliers of goods to charge for carrier bags, and
- for the net proceeds raised to be used for environmental protection, improvement or similar.

However, in [Low Carbon Scotland: Meeting the Emissions Reduction Targets 2010-2022](#) published in March 2011 the Scottish Government stated that it did not plan to deploy these powers at the time:

“Although the Scottish Ministers have these powers, there are no plans to use them to make secondary legislation in the short-term. The Scottish Government's preference is to seek to achieve progress by voluntary means wherever possible rather than by regulation.

In 2012, the Scottish Government set out proposals to introduce a single use carrier bag charge as part of a Scottish Government [consultation](#) called Safeguarding Scotland’s Resources.

In June 2013, the Government published an [analysis](#) of the consultation responses. This analysis found strong support for the proposal to introduce a charge for carrier bags. Those supporting the proposal cited a range of reasons including that carrier bags contribute to pollution and litter; that charging had worked well elsewhere and that it constitutes a strong behaviour change message.

Those opposing the introduction of a charge suggested that consumers may buy other bags, such as bin liners to compensate; that the proposal may have little impact on resource efficiency, and that the proposal is based on a false premise of carrier bags as ‘single use’.

The Single Use Carrier Bags Charge (Scotland) Regulations 2014

On 3 April 2014 [The Single Use Carrier Bags Charge \(Scotland\) Regulations 2014](#) were laid in the Scottish Parliament. The accompanying [Policy Note](#) states that the main policy drivers for the instrument are:

“...the requirement to reduce litter, Scotland’s Zero Waste Plan and Safeguarding Scotland’s Resources which together set out our approach to preventing and managing waste, and using resources more efficiently.”

The note also states that:

“The carrier bag charging policy, by placing a value on a previously 'free' and therefore unvalued item, will encourage re-use, provide an incentive to switch to other types of shopping containers and use them as often as possible, and potentially lead more people to consider re-use of other products.”

The regulations:

- require retailers to charge at least 5p for most single use carrier bags
- define the bags that are within the scope of the regulations including the material that they are made from (plastic, paper and other plant/starch based material)
- apply to all retailers, regardless of type or size
- require retailers with ten or more full time equivalent staff to keep records and make these available to the enforcement authority on request
- specify exemptions from the charge.

The regulations were [approved](#) by the Scottish Parliament in May 2014 and came into force on 20 October 2014.

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11 November 2014**

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