



The Consumer Council

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Mr Daithí McKay MLA
162 Bóthar na dTullachain
Dún Lathaí
Baile Meanach
Co. Aontroma
BT44 9AF

Dear Mr McKay

The Consumer Council welcomes the opportunity to respond to the consultation on the Private Members Bill regarding the proposed introduction of a levy on plastic bags. The Consumer Council works to help consumers make responsible choices, encouraging them to make behavioural changes which will benefit them both today and tomorrow.

Improving resource efficiency and reducing waste throughout all sections of our economy and society is central to minimising our impact on climate change. Although carrier bags account for less than one per cent of household waste in the UK¹ their use is at odds with efforts to move towards a future characterised by the principles of sustainable development.

In December 2008, the UK Government, the Scottish Government, the Welsh Assembly Government the Northern Ireland Executive, the British Retail Consortium and leading supermarkets agreed to a 50 per cent cut in the number of single-use carrier bags given out to customers by Spring 2009. Although results announced in July 2009 show a 48 per cent reduction in the

¹ www.wrap.org.uk

number of single-use carrier bags used across the UK measured against a 2006 baseline, Northern Ireland saw only a 38 per cent reduction, the lowest of all UK regions.

This lower level of reduction experienced in Northern Ireland suggests the need for an incentive to encourage consumers in Northern Ireland to further reduce their consumption of single use plastic bags. Surveys conducted in the Republic of Ireland revealed that since the introduction of the levy, the number of bags entering the consumption stream has reduced by approximately 94 per cent². Prior to the plastic bag levy being introduced, 67 per cent of Irish consumers had never bought reusable shopping bags whereas in 2003, after the plastic bag levy had been introduced, reusable shopping bags were the preferred option for 90 per cent of shoppers³.

The Consumer Council believes it would be positive for the Northern Ireland Executive to explore the potential for a levy on carrier bags in Northern Ireland. The introduction of a levy would, however, result in consumers bearing additional costs as they will have to purchase re-useable carrier bags or pay for single use bags. The Consumer Council suggests that if a levy was to be introduced, supermarkets and other large retailers should subsidise the cost of re-useable carrier bags sold to consumers. Retailers would be able to recover the subsidies through the savings accrued as a result of no longer having to provide single use carrier bags free of charge to consumers.

If environmental gains are to result from the introduction of a levy on carrier bags in Northern Ireland it is important there is strong encouragement of the use of recyclable and reusable bags.

The Consumer Council agrees that the goal of the levy should be to reduce the number of bags in circulation, to encourage the public to re-use the bags they have and recycle them after use.

Research indicates the environmental impact of a reusable plastic bag used at least four times is more sustainable than a single use of a lightweight plastic carrier bag⁴. Therefore incentives (or disincentives) could be applied.

Consumers should be provided with clear and accurate information from both government and retailers on where and how they can purchase re-usable bags, the costs of both re-usable and single use plastic bags and the environmental benefits of reducing plastic bags. This will allow consumers to make informed choices about their own behaviour regarding consumption of plastic bags and the waste they create. It is essential that in encouraging

² Convery, F. McDonnell, S. Ferreira, S. (2007) "The most popular tax in Europe? Lessons from the Irish plastic bags levy".

³ Department of the Environment & Local Government, (2003) Attitudes and Actions 2003: A National Survey on the Environment.

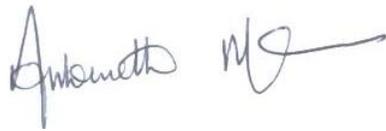
⁴ AEA Technology (2005) Proposed Plastic Bag Levy - Extended Impact Assessment: Volume 1: Main Report. Scottish Executive: Edinburgh
<http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2005/08/1993154/32048>

responsible behaviour, information is kept simple, easily accessible and available in a variety of formats to suit the needs of all consumers.

The Consumer Council suggests revenues raised from a levy on carrier bags should not necessarily be ring fenced specifically for zero waste initiatives but could be used to fund environmental initiatives which will yield the greatest possible reduction in greenhouse gas emissions.

If you wish to discuss this matter further or require any additional information please contact Andy McClenaghan amcclenaghan@consumercouncil.org.uk.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Antoinette McKeown', followed by a long horizontal flourish.

ANTOINETTE McKEOWN
Chief Executive