

Subject: Throw Away Shopping Bags¹

Report Number: 07

Report to: Environment Committee

Date: 15 November 2007

Report of: Executive Director of Secretariat

1 Recommendation

- 1.1 That the Committee notes the report as a background to questioning Councillor Sean Brennan, Leader of Sutton Council, and representatives from the following organisations: Friends of the Earth, the British Retail Consortium, Waste & Resources Action Programme, (WRAP) and the Carrier Bag Consortium.

2 Background

- 2.1 On 11 October 2007 the Environment Committee agreed to conduct a review into the use of Throw Away Shopping Bags. The term of reference for this review is:

The Committee will seek to establish what action is required to significantly reduce the number of throwaway shopping bags issued in London.

- 2.2 More than 1.6 billion carrier bags are issued every year in London, with each person receiving approximately 200 disposable bags each year². Only one in every 200 plastic bags is recycled and plastic bags can take up to 400 years to breakdown. At present there is a voluntary agreement UK agreement between Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) and retailers to reduce the overall environmental impact of throw away shopping bags by 25% by the end of 2008.³
- 2.3 London Councils is seeking new powers to impose a shopping bag levy or a ban on either plastic or all throw away shopping bags. London Councils is seeking a reduction in the environmental impact of throw away bags recognising that alternatives to plastic bags can also be damaging for the environment (paper bags are bulky and heavy so increasing costs of transportation and distribution) and biopolymer-based biodegradable bags are land filled and give off other greenhouses gases such as methane. London Councils is consulting on six options (see below).

¹ Throw away shopping bags include all plastic, paper and biopolymer bags that are used to carry shopping items once they have been purchased.

² Jared Boow (Principle Environmental Policy Officer at London Councils), Report to the Executive: Consultation on a proposed shopping bag levy for London, 11 September 2007.

http://www.londoncouncils.gov.uk/upload/public/attachments/1196/E10-9-07_6_Shopping_Bag_Levy.doc

³ DEFRA, Press Release: UK retailers sign up to cut the environmental impact of carrier bags, 28 February 2007, <http://www.defra.gov.uk/news/2007/070228a.htm>

- 2.4 The purpose of this review is to establish whether the DEFRA voluntary agreement or London Councils' proposals for a 10p levy or an outright ban on plastic throw out shopping bags, will deliver a sustained reduction their use.

3 Issues for consideration

Context

- 3.1 Around 13 billion carrier bags are issued nationally every year, with each adult receiving on average 200 disposable bags each year;
- 88% of shoppers currently put all their shopping bags into free carrier bags;
 - on average shoppers take three to four bags at every shopping trip;
 - 45% of shoppers claim to have bought a reusable "Bag for Life" but only 12% use them regularly;
 - only one in every 200 plastic bags are recycled; and
 - plastic bags can take up to 400 years to breakdown.⁴
- 3.2 **DEFRA's new Waste Strategy** sets out a vision of working with retailers for a voluntary end to the use of free single use bags. This could include retailers only selling long-life bags, or retailers charging for disposable bags and using the proceeds to sell long-life bags at a discount. As a first step toward this UK retailers, including the major supermarkets, Boots and Primark, have signed up to a target to reduce the environmental impact of carrier bag usage by 25% by 2008 – a reduction that would equate to 3.25 billion less bags in a year.⁵
- 3.3 In **Ireland** the Plastic Bag Environmental Levy was introduced on 4th March 2002. It is a charge on plastic shopping bags that applies at the point of sale in shops, supermarkets, service stations and all sales outlets. Retailers are required to pass on the full amount of the levy as a charge to customers at the checkout. The initial charge was 15 Euro cents per bag for carrier bags that are not exempt⁶. Revenue generated from the Plastic Bag Environmental Levy goes into an Environmental Fund. This fund is used to support waste management, anti-litter and other environmental initiatives. Plastic bag manufacturers and distributors argue that the Irish scheme has led to more plastic packaging and a huge increase in the use of paper bags. Following the introduction of the levy there was an immediate decrease in plastic bag usage from 328 bags per capita to 21 (an over 90% reduction). Subsequently there has been a gradual increase, with per capita use rising to 31 in 2006. The levy was increased to 22 cents on 1st July 2007 to ensure that its effectiveness is maintained.⁷
- 3.4 Darren Johnson AM and Murad Qureshi AM, the Chair and Deputy Chair of the Environment Committee, visited Dublin on 6 November 2007 to discuss the impacts of the legislation with Ireland's Environment Minister John Gormley TD and leading environmental policy analysts from University College Dublin.

⁴ London Councils, Press release: London proposes 10p plastic bag levy to save the environment, 13 August 2007, <http://www.londoncouncils.gov.uk/doc.asp?doc=20463>

⁵ Defra, Waste Strategy for England 2007, May 2007,

<http://www.defra.gov.uk/environment/waste/strategy/strategy07/pdf/waste07-strategy.pdf> (this mentions 300 per year)

⁶ Exemptions from the levy: Smaller plastic bags that are used to store non-packaged goods; Smaller plastic bags that are used to store fresh meat, fish and poultry, both packaged and unpackaged; Bags for life costing more than 70 cents; Bags supplied to intending passengers in airports and ports and passengers on board commercial aircraft and ships; Items sold in the secure 'duty free' zone of airports in Ireland.

⁷ <http://www.environ.ie/en/Environment/Waste/PlasticBags/>

- 3.5 In early 2007, the small town of **Modbury, Devon** saw its 43 retail traders introduce a voluntary plastic bag ban, after wildlife photographer Rebecca Hosking led a campaign highlighting the damage done to wildlife. It is the first town in Europe to introduce a complete ban. The town has introduced alternatives such as biopolymer, paper and cotton bags. One retailer, the town's deli, has seen the 200 or so plastic bags it used to give out reduced to one or two corn starch bags since most shoppers have changed to bringing their own bags.
- 3.6 On 1 September 2007 the majority of **Hebden Bridge** traders stopped issuing new plastic bags when goods are purchased. Shoppers in Hebden Bridge are encouraged to bring their own shopping bags. Alternatively plant starch based bags, that are compostable, are issued at a cost of five pence.
- 3.7 In June 2005, Mike Pringle MSP introduced the Environmental Levy on Plastic Bags (**Scotland**) Bill in the Scottish Parliament. The Bill would have required all retailers to charge customers at least 10p for every plastic bag. The 10p levy would be used to fund environmental projects. Failure by retailers to charge the levy would have been a criminal offence. The main difference to the Irish scheme was that local authorities were to collect the levy rather than the revenue department. The Bill was withdrawn in October 2006.⁸
- 3.8 The London Councils consultation, which runs to 26 October, had set out six options for consideration. They were:
- OPTION 1: Status quo- 'do nothing'**- This option retains the current system, which includes a voluntary UK-wide agreement between DEFRA and retailers to reduce the overall environmental impact of carrier bags by 25% by end of 2008.
- OPTION 2: Outright ban**- This option involves banning the handing out of throw out shopping bags by retailers in the Greater London area.
- OPTION 3: Council-collected 'tax-like' levy**- This option involves local authorities collecting a 'levy' from retailers arising from the sale of throw out shopping bags (similar to the proposals in the Scottish Bill).
- OPTION 4: Retailer-collected levy with environment fund**- This option involves requiring retailers to charge a 'levy' on the sale of throw out shopping bags and requiring them to put some of the money from this into an environmental fund of some description.
- OPTION 5: Plastic bags only**- Any of the above (ii)-(iv) options, but including only plastic bags.
- OPTION 6: Major retailers only**- Any of the above (ii)-(v) options, but focusing only on the major retailers (an annual turnover criteria or similar could be used to define this).
- 3.7 At its Leaders Committee on 13 November 2007, London Councils will report back on the results of their consultation and agree on which option to pursue in a Private Bill. Councillor Sean Brennan, Leader of Sutton Council, will update those present on London Councils' proposals.

4 Strategy implications

- 4.1 The Mayor recently informed the London Assembly that GLA waste officers will be producing a waste reduction and reuse plan to set out measures for reducing London's waste and increasing reuse. This will include identifying methods for reducing the use of plastic bags by retailers in

⁸ <http://www.scottish.parliament.uk/business/bills/43-environmentalLevy/index.htm>

London. The Mayor's draft Business Waste Strategy also addresses the reduction of plastic bags, through:

- the production of a retail sector action plan
- a conference of producers and grocery retailers to discuss the production and retail of materials that cannot be recycled or composted in London, and
- negotiating with the Government to establish statutory measures to implement producer responsibility legislation rather than persisting with voluntary agreements..

5 Legal implications

5.1 Under S.59 of the Greater London Authority Act 1999 the Assembly has the power to keep under review the exercise by the Mayor of his statutory functions. The powers of the Assembly include the power to investigate and prepare reports about:

- any actions and decisions of the Mayor;
- any actions and decisions of any member of staff of the Authority;
- matters relating to the principal purposes of the Authority;
- matters in relation to which statutory functions are exercisable by the Mayor, and
- any other matters which the Assembly considers to be of importance to Greater London.

5.2 Section 54(1) GLA Act enables the Assembly to arrange for any of its functions to be discharged by a committee or sub-committee of the Assembly or by a single member of the Assembly.

6 Financial implications

6.1 There are no financial implications to the GLA arising from this report.

Background Papers:

- London Council's Transport and Environment Committee papers for 13 July 2007

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