



Environmental Audit Committee

Oral evidence: [Plastic bags](#), HC 861

Wednesday 18 December 2013

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Written evidence from witnesses:

- [Dr W Poortinga](#)
- [WRAP](#)
- [CPRE](#)
- [PAFA](#)
- [British Retail Consortium](#)
- [DEFRA](#)

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Members present: Joan Walley (Chair), Neil Carmichael, Martin Caton, Katy Clark, Zac Goldsmith, Caroline Lucas, Dr Matthew Offord, Mrs Caroline Spelman, Dr Alan Whitehead, Simon Wright

Questions 1-86

Witnesses: **Dr Wouter Poortinga**, Reader in Environmental Psychology, Cardiff University, **Matthew Quinn**, Director for Environment, Welsh Government, and **Dr Richard Swannell**, Director of Sustainable Food Systems, WRAP gave evidence.

Q1 Chair: This the first of three panels this afternoon, which is the first part of our short inquiry into plastic bags. May I start with a warm welcome to each of the three witnesses before us? Thank you very much indeed for coming, especially given that it is so close to Christmas. It might help you and the Committee to know that we will try to whizz through the very specific questions that we have, so that we can hear as wide a spectrum of information as possible. We will have a further session in January, and we hope to have a report that will feed into whatever action the Government are taking. I think you will agree that this is an important inquiry.

I want to start by asking the three of you, with your expertise, to help us understand whether any common principles have come to light from the experience in different

countries, and particularly how the design of the Welsh scheme plays into that. Are there lessons that we should be learning from what has happened in Wales? Obviously, we have a Welsh Member of Parliament on the Committee as well. Mr Quinn, would you like to start?

Matthew Quinn: Thank you very much. I am Matthew Quinn, and I am the Environment Director for the Welsh Government. I will just say a little in terms of background. We have had the charge since 1 October 2011. It is a minimum charge of 5p on all single-use bags, regardless of material, and it is for all retailers, regardless of size. That was a conscious decision, in terms of the rationale for doing this, which was around total, rather than specific, environmental impacts. The proceeds are passed on, through a voluntary agreement, from retailers to charities, or causes of their choice. A large number of retailers are signed up to that voluntary agreement. There are specific exceptions to the charge, which are largely around public health and safety issues, such as unwrapped food and the like.

Q2 Chair: We will come to some of the details of the design later. We really want to understand at the very start what lessons of best practice you learned from other countries while designing your scheme.

Matthew Quinn: We looked quite widely at all the different countries, at both voluntary and legislative schemes. There were not many that were looking at the totality of impact; a lot of them were about specific impacts. We learned quite a lot from the Irish experience, in terms of the risk of substitution effects from targeting specific types of bags, and also in terms of reactions to levels of charging. That significantly informed the work that we did. I do not know whether colleagues want to offer anything on that.

Dr Poortinga: My name is Wouter Poortinga, and I am a reader in environmental psychology at Cardiff university. I conducted an evaluation for the Welsh Government of the carrier bag charge. I also conducted a literature review of other initiatives that have been taken around the world, most of which have been pricing-based policies or instruments, and most of which have been shown to be effective. Overall, there is not a huge variety of schemes that have been reported in the academic literature, so it is very difficult to say what the relative effectiveness is of different instruments.

Q3 Chair: But I think it was your evidence that shows that some countries were able to achieve reductions in bag use of 50% to 90% in the short term.

Dr Poortinga: That is correct, yes.

Q4 Chair: I just wonder what factors make that happen.

Dr Poortinga: As I said before, not all of them have been evaluated, and I looked only at the schemes that have been evaluated. They have shown a reduction of 50% to 90%, or 95%. It is very difficult to say what the factors are, as I said, because there is not a huge variation in those schemes, but you can see that most of the pricing-based policies have been effective, irrespective of the size of the levy. The most effective ones are those with the highest charge, such as the one in Ireland, but ones with smaller charges, including in Wales and the US, with charges of 5p or 5 cents, can produce a similar kind of effect, so in this case, size does not really matter.

Q5 Chair: Did you wish to add to that, Dr Swannell?

Dr Swannell: My name is Richard Swannell, and I am a director of WRAP. I would echo what you have just heard. In advance of what happened in Wales, the basic evidence was that the pricing strategy seems to lead to a rapid and significant decrease in the use of bags. Actually, the evidence is now much clearer as to the impact of what happened in Wales, and that has probably been better documented than other examples reported around the world.

Q6 Mrs Spelman: Following on from that, you looked at the Irish experience, where 13p was levied on a bag, and that has resulted over time in a 90% reduction in plastic bag use, but you chose to go for the figure of 5p, and you have done well in getting to a 76% reduction. Did you think again about the price level that you set?

Matthew Quinn: We originally consulted at 7p, and that was set after economic work, in terms of looking at what would not create economic disbenefit but would create sufficient incentive. In the course of the consultation, retailers in particular felt that 5p, which was a figure they were used to using, and which Marks & Spencer and others have had experience of having an effect, would be a better sum, so on reflection, in the consultation, we went for 5p. The range of figures is up to about 90% in terms of initial impact; we have figures, in terms of the total range, in the high 70s. The 5p figure seems to have had a significant impact, certainly in terms of what we were particularly looking for, which was discouraging single use—that is, getting people to reuse bags. The evidence that we and colleagues have collected suggests that has had an impact, and that people are now used to bringing a bag to go shopping, so it has been useful, even at a 5p charge.

Q7 Mrs Spelman: When you were looking around at other countries, Italy went out on a limb in the EU and decided to ban plastic bags altogether. Did you consider that, or did you receive advice that it might or might not be legal to do it that way?

Matthew Quinn: Well, the legality was an interesting point, so yes, that was certainly something we thought about. Also, in terms of looking at all bags rather than a specific type of bag, and wanting to create behaviour change, a ban does not clearly address that; obviously, you need bags and you want behaviour change, and a ban effectively does not relate to either of those issues, so it was not something we pursued.

Q8 Mrs Spelman: In your first comments, you said that a lot of this is covered by voluntary agreements, but how do you therefore enforce the charge, and have you ever prosecuted anyone for not charging this levy on the use of the plastic bags?

Matthew Quinn: To clarify, it is only the use of the proceeds from the charge that is voluntary at the moment. We have some reserve powers that we took to direct payment. However, given that at the time the only powers we had were to direct the proceeds to environmental causes, and that we had quite strong representations from the industry that it had established charitable relationships that it wanted to continue, we decided to stick with a voluntary agreement on that, which has raised—from the 43 retailers whose results we looked at—more than £4 million for charities since it started. However, there is a legal requirement to raise a minimum charge of 5p.

To our knowledge, there have been no prosecutions, but there have been a number of trading standards warnings given, and a number of trading standards reports and inquiries into specific cases. We are dependent on public reporting for that. There is not a particular programme for that; it is just part of normal trading standards work.

Q9 Mrs Spelman: And under these voluntary agreements, on where the proceeds go to—

Matthew Quinn: A charity of choice, now.

Q10 Mrs Spelman: Who checks or verifies that it is a genuine registered charity, which you are happy for such taxes to be associated with?

Matthew Quinn: We do nothing on that, but they are required to report where the proceeds have gone and, if they are large, to publicise that and publish it, so it is transparent to people how that money has been used, which we thought was very important, in terms of the accountability for the charge.

Q11 Martin Caton: Good afternoon. The proposal for England suggests more exemptions than we have in Wales: small retailers, biodegradables and paper bags. Did you consider having those sorts of exemptions in Wales?

Matthew Quinn: We looked at the scope. Some of this came originally from a petition that was raised, which particularly mentioned plastic bags as the focus. We particularly commissioned a piece of work from the Environment Agency, which was then our principle adviser, on the total environmental impact of different single-use bags. It was clear from that that most of the alternative materials actually had a greater impact on the environment, in total, than did a light-gauge, single-use plastic bag. Given that our approach was to look at total resource use and attitudinal change—also, to be honest, we considered simplicity for the consumer—we took the decision to go with all bags and all retailers.

Q12 Martin Caton: I have a question for Dr Poortinga. We heard what you said about the paucity of research in this area, but have you not been able to identify any better approaches to differentiate between the different types of scheme?

Dr Poortinga: Well, there are, of course, many types of scheme. One of them was mentioned: a ban. However, the one example that I found in the literature, which was in South Australia, actually found a similar kind of reduction in carrier bag use overall. That was a ban in combination with a small charge on compostable carrier bags, but overall the reduction was the same. The voluntary measures that I have found in the literature could reduce plastic bag or carrier bag use, but far less effectively—they are almost half as effective as a charge or a complete ban.

Q13 Martin Caton: We have received submissions describing the Government's proposals for England as complex and potentially sending out conflicting messages. Would you agree with that assessment?

Dr Poortinga: I do agree with that, yes—completely. It gives mixed messages; for the consumer, it is not very clear. The question is why you want to do this. If the aim is behaviour change and reducing single-use carrier bags, it can be quite confusing for the consumer. From that perspective, I think it would be less effective than a charge on all types of carrier bags.

Q14 Caroline Lucas: Have you been able to see any distinction between the different communication messages that went alongside the financial disincentive? There is a lot of discussion in the psychology as to whether or not bans, telling people what they cannot do, or really shoving an environmental message down people's throats sometimes have perverse outcomes. Have you looked at all at the messages that have gone alongside the instrument itself?

Dr Poortinga: Not in this context, no. I have not been able to look at that.

Caroline Lucas: That is a pity.

Matthew Quinn: We did, however, look at the levels of acceptability. The figures were initially high, and have risen following introduction in Wales.

Dr Poortinga: Yes, sure. That is the evaluation of the Welsh scheme, looking at attitudes and the acceptability of the carrier bag charge. Both became more positive afterwards. After it has been introduced, people can see the benefits, and find out that it is quite easy to adapt to a charge. You can see that with other kinds of behaviour change policies as well. Congestion charging is a good example, as is the smoking ban.

Dr Swannell: One thing that the research shows is that the rationale for changing behaviour is indeed the charge in the first instance and then, secondly, the benefits for the environment. More than half the people surveyed in the report by the Welsh Government and Zero Waste Scotland said that that was the principal reason for acting, but people did see the environmental benefits.

Q15 Chair: While we are on the issue of behaviour change, is what is happening in Wales being researched and followed up? Do you have a public education programme that runs alongside it?

Matthew Quinn: It is certainly part of the overall waste reduction programme that we have, and we are definitely tracking the research. As we have been quite light-touch in the requirements, we do not have a central database of what is happening, so we are having to do it by individual sample research, but we are currently tracking that through.

Q16 Caroline Lucas: On that point, are there adverts, for example, telling people about the impact of plastics on the environment and so forth? I am not quite clear about how much it is just a financial measure and how much it is part of a wider scheme.

Matthew Quinn: We did do quite a lot of material around advertising at the time, and you will see the material in various shops. The other thing that is really striking is the requirement to publicise the use of the charge. So in any of the major retailers or firms, as you go in—typically, either on the door or by the counter—you will see a notice saying, “This is what we have raised from the charge and this is the cause on which it was spent.”

Certainly, in terms of that acceptability of this being something that is creating positive social impact, that is there.

It is less clear—this is some of the other research—that it, in itself, has yet been seen to engender other positive environmental behaviour, but then the attitudes to waste and recycling were quite high in Wales anyway, because of our other activity. We now have the highest recycling rate in the UK, for example. So it is difficult to distinguish an impact of the charge, specifically.

Q17 Dr Offord: Dr Swannell, to what extent would you say—disregarding littering, for the moment—that the environmental impact of carrier or plastic bags has reduced?

Dr Swannell: We have done a fairly comprehensive bit of analysis, in partnership with others, of the Wales experience. Most of our data is based on supermarket data which has been provided voluntarily, and that is pretty clear-cut: before you had the tax, the amount of carrier bag usage in Wales was pretty much the same as the rest of the UK. Almost directly afterwards, we saw a reduction. In the first year of operation, there was a 76% reduction overall.

But the other two key areas—these are things that come out of the international research—are, did you see a shift to “bags for life” and did you see an increase in bin bags? Because it has been quite clearly established that people use single-use bags at home for bin bags. Also, if you are having to pay for a small or a thin bag, would you prefer a thicker bag? Those are two other areas that we looked at. Interestingly, on “bags for life”, the sales increased substantially directly after the charge was put in, by about 130%, roughly speaking, whereas in the rest of the UK, it stayed constant.

Also, we saw an increase in the number of swing bin bags and normal bin bags, but not refuse sacks and not nappy bags, to give you an example. So definitely people were switching to buying bags, whereas previously they had been using single-use bags. Take those both into account, though, and the net benefit for Wales was still significant. The “bags for life” wiped off about 30% of the reduction and the bin bags another four, so overall the impact has been a substantial net positive.

Q18 Dr Offord: Would you like to predict what trend we are likely to see in England, if a ban was not introduced—or rather a charge was introduced?

Dr Swannell: We have been charting the data from about 2006. As a result of a voluntary agreement, we saw it go down. Once the targets had stopped on that voluntary agreement, we have seen it steadily creep back up. So, last year, England increased by about 4.4% and I would honestly say—we are into a period of increased economic growth—that I suspect that would continue to go up, not dramatically, but at a similar rate.

Q19 Zac Goldsmith: The Environment Agency has calculated that you need to use a “bag for life” 11 times to have the same carbon impact. It said that you would need to use a cotton bag 131 times to have the same carbon impact. I am interested to know if there is any study that you are aware of which has attempted to look at how often people are willing to use these different types of bags.

Dr Swannell: Not in that level of detail. It is interesting that the Zero Waste Scotland and Welsh Government studies attempted to work out some answer to that question, and came up with some quite interesting results. They compared and contrasted pretty much a year into the Welsh scheme—they did surveys and observational studies in Wales—with Scotland, which was, of course, without a charge at that time. They found that, in Scotland, 77% of people were using single-use carrier bags, with limited reuse, and completely the reverse in Wales, where about 18% were using the single-use and over 50% were reusing “bags for life”. So that gives you some evidence that people are getting “bags for life” and reusing them. Quite how many times, there is no evidence on that yet.

Certainly, as said in response to the previous question, we saw the big increase in “bags for life”. It would be interesting to see what happens over the next few years. Will that come back down again, as people get bags that they want, or will it continue at an elevated rate? We don’t know the answer to that, and I am not aware of research that deeply answers that question.

Q20 Zac Goldsmith: So if you take a big-picture approach and judge the different types of bags that can be used, not just on the basis of carbon footprint but in terms of the broader environmental impact, including things such as litter and the effects on the marine environment, do you have a view of which carrier bag has the least negative impact on the environment?

Dr Swannell: The honest answer is no, I don’t have a view. It is very difficult to judge it completely in the round. For example, I am not aware of any detailed evidence about the marine impact, which is quite difficult to judge. It depends on how you value it. What we have always said as an organisation is that people should reuse the bags they like again and again and recycle them at the end of their life. That will lead to a net environmental benefit.

Q21 Zac Goldsmith: Moving along the panel, are there any circumstances in which you would want to introduce charges for “bags for life” in Wales?

Matthew Quinn: We are consulting on a future environment Bill—we have just finished an environment White Paper—and we have flagged up the possibility that we might take reserve powers in that area to ensure a differential. We have seen some retailers offering very light-gauge “bags for life” at low prices.

Q22 Zac Goldsmith: We’ve more or less covered the next point, but, in a sentence, is it the view of everyone on the panel that the net benefit of the initiative has not been significantly undermined by the increased purchase of other types of plastic bags? The original point you made is that, in real terms, the benefits outweigh the downside.

Dr Swannell: That’s the evidence we have, yes.

Matthew Quinn: Absolutely; on the basis that we have applied it to all bags, so there are no other substitution effects going on to more environmentally impactful bags, other than the substitution with “bags for life”.

Dr Poortinga: I am also of that opinion.

Q23 Neil Carmichael: What comparative studies have you made with, for example, New York, where they have paper bags, or France, where you don't get a plastic bag at all unless you buy one? They have already gone down different pathways, and it would be interesting to know what you have learned from those examples and others.

Dr Poortinga: Again, I have to come back to my first response. In the academic literature, there is not a lot of information about those different schemes. Only a few of them have been evaluated, or at least reported, in the academic literature. For example, I am not aware of any study that has been conducted to evaluate the example of New York. It is therefore difficult to say what we can learn from those examples. There are other types of policy, such as a ban, which I think would have the same effect as a levy, and voluntary measures, which can reduce carrier bag or plastic bag use but is only half as effective as a levy. In the Netherlands, where I am from, you don't have light-weight carrier bags at the till, so you always take your own bag or buy a "bag for life".

Matthew Quinn: Our experience from looking at the issue and speaking to colleagues is that, if you exempt some types of bags, there are substitution effects into those bags. If you exempt paper or combustibles, you get more use of those. The work that the Environment Agency did for us suggested that those bags had a greater environmental impact in the round than a light-gauge, single-use bag. It did not look attractive for us to do that.

Dr Swannell: I totally echo what Dr Poortinga said. The other examples around the world have not been as well evaluated as what we have heard here. I am not aware of anything else. We have not done an in-depth study right across the world, and I am not aware of any better data.

Q24 Neil Carmichael: The essence of the question is that, wherever you are in the rest of the world, you see different cultures and different systems. Presumably, evaluating the impact of those systems would be a good idea.

Witnesses indicated assent.

Q25 Dr Whitehead: Did you look at the potential health risks from the reuse of bags, particularly as it relates to hot food? If you did, did you have any concerns about whether the exemptions that you put in place covered that point adequately?

Matthew Quinn: We did speak to the Food Standards Agency in terms of those issues. That was one of the issues we looked at. Specifically, unwrapped foods are exempt, because effectively the bag is the packaging. Otherwise, in terms of reuse of bags, it is simple: no more public health hygiene-type issues. People just need to make sure that, if any food substances have leaked into a bag, it is either cleaned or disposed of. So we are not aware of any impacts.

Chair: We've got two questions from Caroline and Zac.

Q26 Mrs Spelman: Have there been cases where a consumer used a bag that had had some leakage from food products purchased the week before and that gave rise to food poisoning?

Matthew Quinn: We are not aware of any.

Q27 Zac Goldsmith: We had a debate in Parliament on this about a year ago. A briefing was sent out by either the packaging industry or the British Retail Consortium, who are coming afterwards. One of the key points they raised in opposition to this measure was that it would be regressive: people on lower incomes would be disproportionately impacted. I am not sure why that would be the case. Does anything in your experience back that up?

Matthew Quinn: No. It is obviously an issue that we looked at quite hard, but this is an avoidable charge.

Q28 Zac Goldsmith: So there is no evidence at all of people being disproportionately affected if they are on low incomes.

Matthew Quinn: No. If anything, it is possibly the opposite.

Q29 Chair: We have reached the end of our questions for you. It has been very helpful to have that glimpse into what happened in Wales. Before we move on to our next panel, have you any words of advice, either to us for a recommendation or to the Secretary of State, based on your experience in Wales?

Matthew Quinn: I don't think that I probably better should, actually. It's another Government, so I'll leave it to colleagues.

Dr Swannell: The only thing I would add, Chair, is the benefit of monitoring, because then you can see any unintended consequences. I think monitoring really helps understand the consequences of any particular action.

Q30 Chair: Should that be written into the scheme?

Dr Swannell: I'm not sure that I am advocating that, because it was not in Wales, as it turned out, but I think that making sure that you monitor what the impact is really helps.

Dr Poortinga: I do agree with the last point. I would also like to make a distinction between short-term and long-term impacts. As I have said before, very few schemes have been evaluated and even fewer have been looked at in the longer term. Those that were followed for a longer term saw an increase in carrier bag use a number of years after they were introduced, so it could be worth while to review the size of the charge a number of years after its introduction.

Q31 Chair: Do you have any thoughts on how the attitude we have towards consumption is linked to the carrier bag policies we have? Has there been a discernible behaviour change in relation to that?

Dr Poortinga: Well, we did look at that in our evaluation of the Welsh carrier bag charge and people felt more waste conscious after the charge was introduced. We also looked at other waste changes or waste decisions, and we did not find any evidence of that in the short term.

Chair: Thank you very much indeed for your time. We move on to our next set of panellists.

Examination of Witnesses

Witnesses: **Andrew Opie**, Director of Food and Sustainability, British Retail Consortium, **Neil Sinden**, Policy Manager, Campaign to Protect Rural England, and **Barry Turner**, Chief Executive, Packaging and Films Association, gave evidence.

Chair: Okay, I think all three of you listened into our first panel. I would like to give an equally warm welcome to each of you and thank you for coming before us before Christmas. As I explained, we have this very short inquiry into plastic bags, and we thought it was important to try to look at the whole range of different sectors and interests in this issue. You three are all very welcome indeed.

Q32 Dr Offord: In their evidence to this Committee, the British Plastics Federation said that plastic carrier bags make up a very small component of waste: about 1%. Indeed, WRAP also told us that. We understand that reducing the use of plastic bags will not have a significant impact environmentally, particularly with regard to other types of waste, so why should we be so concerned about plastic bags?

Barry Turner: My personal position is that it is distracting us from more important issues in terms of areas of the environment that we should be focusing on. It sends confusing messages as well, because it is such a small part of our environmental impact. By focusing on this area, you are potentially misleading the general consumer to think that we are dealing with an issue of far greater significance than it is. My personal position, and our industry's position, is that this takes us away from areas that we should really focus on that have far more environmental impact.

Neil Sinden: It won't surprise you to hear that CPRE disagrees with that view. You might argue that in terms of volume of waste and by weight—on that simple measure alone—it is a relatively small issue that is distracting, but that is a narrow way of looking at the problem. Single-use bags, and plastic carrier bags in particular, are a huge litter problem. Keep Britain Tidy says that they are found in one in 10 litter sites, but we think that that is an underestimate. They are very conspicuous in terms of their volume and the fact that they get blown around. They are among the largest items of litter found in one in 10 littered sites, so we think there is a broader perspective to take on this. Waste by weight is one perspective, but it is very narrow.

On the pro-environmental behaviour that we think a charge of this kind can encourage, there are huge benefits to be had.

Andrew Opie: I think I would agree to a certain extent with Barry. We are dealing with what we would consider to be bigger environmental impact issues at the moment alongside carrier bags. Food waste, for example, has a much more significant impact on the environment, and there is the whole general issue around sustainable consumption and production as well, but we understand that carrier bags have attracted a lot of attention over the years, certainly with the moves in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland now. We understand the position in England, and I guess we are at the stage now where we would say we would not actually pursue a charge if it was down to us as an organisation, but we

understand the pressure to reduce carrier bags for other reasons. If we do pursue this, the only plea we would make is that we pursue a system that is consistent and logical for consumers and puts the least burden on retailers in terms of regulation.

Q33 Dr Offord: Do you believe that plastic bags have a particular characteristic that makes them more environmentally damaging? I am thinking about the maritime environment and the fact that they do not biodegrade in water. Are there any characteristics, Mr Sinden?

Neil Sinden: Yes. I was going to say that the impacts on wildlife are potentially very considerable. We are part of the Break the Bag Habit campaign group, which includes the Marine Conservation Society, as well as Keep Britain Tidy, Surfers Against Sewage and the greening the Thames initiative. The Marine Conservation Society has provided you with strong written evidence about the impacts of plastic bags in the marine environment and the concerns around the long-term effects of microplastics in the environment. I am not an expert on that issue, but I think it is an important factor that you need to bear in mind.

Barry Turner: Can I just add a few points on that? As an industry, clearly, we deplore littering, and we have been working very hard with organisations such as the Marine Conservation Society and others right across the world to tackle littering. Where we have a concern with the policies is that we do not think that imposing a charge on a product will necessarily change behaviour in terms of littering. That is one of our significant concerns. We certainly support any policy that encourages resource minimisation, recycling and reuse. If we thought that this was an instant solution to littering and would have benefits across the range, we might change our position, but we do not think that. The Marine Conservation Society would cite that carrier bags make up only 2% of all litter on beaches. The way we look at the littering situation across the world is that, whatever we do in this country, the litter that finds its way into the oceans does not just come from this country, so it has to be tackled uniformly across the globe. That is the approach that our industry is taking and will continue to take.

Q34 Caroline Lucas: My immediate response is that it seems a bit perverse to say that, because lots of other countries don't do it, we are not going to do it. Increasing numbers of countries are doing it, and it is a relatively simple thing to do. Notwithstanding the overall size of the problem, I wonder whether Neil Sinden has any evidence that the policy enables organisations to take people on more of a journey into doing other environmentally beneficial things. It is relatively easy to engage people on this because it is understandable and very present. There is always a debate in the environmental movement on whether small and relatively easy things can begin to get people more aware of bigger environmental problems. Have you done any research, or are you aware of any research?

Neil Sinden: I'm afraid that we haven't, and I am not aware of any research in that area, but it is a very important point. We heard from Welsh colleagues earlier that they have picked up signs that the policy is beginning to encourage people to think in different ways. I would like any monitoring of a scheme introduced in England to look specifically at that question. Anecdotally, we have evidence from public polling suggesting that people respond very positively to the notion of a charge on plastic bags. There is majority public support in England, even now, when a charge has not been introduced. The evidence in Wales and, I believe, Ireland shows that that public support will grow. I suppose that that is some kind of

indicator that people think differently about taking action on single-use carrier bags in response to a charge.

Q35 Simon Wright: I have some questions specifically for Mr Opie on the perspective of retailers on this issue. How effective do you think a plastic bag charge will prove to be in reducing their number? Do you think that more could still be achieved through voluntary schemes?

Andrew Opie: As WRAP alluded to earlier, we were involved in a voluntary scheme from 2006, and we achieved quite a rapid decline in the use of carrier bags, from some 12 billion in 2006 to just about 8 billion today—the figure has crept up recently. We have found that there is a difference between the reduction in Wales, which did introduce a charge, and the reduction in England. That is not for want of trying by retailers. You will probably be aware that, wherever you shop, there are plenty of messages and staff are trained to encourage people to reuse carrier bags or use “bags for life”. Reward points are offered for reusing your bags in supermarkets. Lots of incentives are being offered, but it looks as if we have plateaued. The figures that we have at the moment show a slight rise, but that may be partly due to the increased population and the increased number of shoppers. That does not change the fact that we have pretty much plateaued after the initial, fairly good reduction. That compares quite starkly with Wales. We have made it clear to the Government that we have made a significant reduction in the number of carrier bags, but it is clear that, if the Government want to see a bigger reduction, a charge, as in Wales, is how you go to the next level. It is not for want of trying. I think most consumers know that they are reminded to try and bring a bag when they visit a supermarket. They are offered reward points. All the incentives are there, but we are not making that much more progress than we have since that significant reduction in 2006.

Q36 Simon Wright: How would you sum up the main pros and cons of what the Government are proposing from a retailer’s perspective?

Andrew Opie: I think our problem is that it looks more illogical compared with the regulations that we have seen in Wales and Northern Ireland and that are likely to be introduced in Scotland in terms of the way that it is administered. For us in particular, the specific reference to plastic bags, rather than to bags in general, does not send a consistent signal to consumers around reuse. It was mentioned earlier that one of the important things here is to drive reuse, and I think you do that through behavioural change. Using a bag that might not be plastic but is still single use and could still become litter does not change behaviour. We think that the proposal is confused and does not send the right signal. There is also the exemption from store to store. One consumer could go into one store and be charged for a single-use carrier bag and then go next door and not be charged. The message is confusing for consumers. The consistent approach that we have seen from the models in Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland is the right one to adopt. For us operating as UK companies, it is of course a much easier way in terms of business and better regulation.

Q37 Simon Wright: Do you have reason to believe that retailers might switch to paper bags, for example, as a result of this?

Andrew Opie: It’s not a given, but we do know that there have been some examples in the Republic of Ireland, which went down the plastic-bag-specific route. There were some

cases with certain products where retailers did return to paper bags. That may not be the case here, but we are in a very competitive industry. If there was seen to be some advantage in doing that that was driven by consumer demand, there is a risk. All I am saying is that there is a possibility.

Q38 Simon Wright: Finally, how should online retailers be affected by this? Obviously, a consumer buying their groceries online does not have a choice in the type or number of bags that are used as part of that transaction. Should they be affected in the same way?

Andrew Opie: Yes; they are in Wales already. The scheme already operates in Wales. Companies obviously operate online there and they have various tools for both charging members of the public who order online, but also for providing incentives not to use bags. Some retailers will deliver in crates, for example, rather than bags, and they will make that clear when you order your goods online. They are caught by the regulations in Wales and Northern Ireland. They operate to them, and they have found tools to work with their consumers to help them to use fewer carrier bags, but also to charge them where appropriate.

Q39 Simon Wright: So that would be the approach that you would wish to see.

Andrew Opie: Absolutely. All that we are saying today is: a consistent approach that follows the models that are already operating.

Neil Sinden: Can I just say that the CPRE absolutely endorses and supports that position? We congratulate the Government on their decision that we need a mandatory system. Moving on from that base, we need to address the issues around complexity and confusion, and I think the CPRE and the BRC have common ground on those issues.

Barry Turner: If a charge had to be imposed, even our industry would hold the same position, because if the exemptions were pursued, there is evidence to say that the environmental impacts would increase, not decrease. We would fully support both organisations' position if a charge, indeed, is imposed.

Q40 Mrs Spelman: Keep Britain Tidy's annual litter survey showed a disparity in that 3% of littering was caused by supermarket carriers compared with 6% for other retailers. Is the role of smaller retailers more significant and should it therefore be embraced in what the Government propose?

Andrew Opie: We obviously canvassed our members when the proposal came out from DEFRA and we have a number of organisations—other trade associations—that represent small stores as well as chains. Not one of them came back to us and said that they wanted to be exempt. In fact, the Booksellers Association actually came back and said that it would prefer to be covered by the charge. There are good reasons, such as consistency in application across all stores. This is a nil cost to retailers, because if you look at the Welsh scheme for example, what the Welsh Government have done there is to say, "Okay, the charge applies to all, but the reporting restrictions, which could potentially add a burden, are relaxed for smaller companies." They have taken note of the potential business burden on smaller companies in the way the reporting restrictions apply to them. We are not seeing any of our members saying that they want this exemption for small stores.

Q41 Mrs Spelman: That is interesting. I expect that all of you saw the press coverage from the smaller retailers articulating the view that, for the sake of not confusing the customer, they would prefer not to be exempt.

Andrew Opie: There are good commercial reasons as well. Bags cost to give to customers. The smaller retailers will pay more, proportionately, for their bags—because they are a volume product—than a large retailer would. A reduction in the number of bags through a consistent approach benefits them as well.

Neil Sinden: There are other benefits as well, such as saving on space for storage and encouraging stronger connections with your local community, which, arguably, might be more useful for smaller stores, and it is easier for them to pursue that angle.

I think there is also a rural dimension, in terms of the figures that you've quoted, that littering is greater and there are more smaller stores proportionally in rural communities. Even now, we are seeing plastic bags being found disproportionately more frequently on rural roads. The risk is that if you exclude smaller stores from a scheme, you would see that becoming a bigger problem in rural areas and not so much in urban.

Barry Turner: May I add a couple of points about the KBT survey? It has been interesting to note that over the period that they have been surveying supermarket bags, the amount of litter attributed to supermarket grocery bags has fallen. It is one of the few—I'm afraid to say—items littered, of all the items littered, that has shown such a decrease.

As far as litter in the countryside is concerned, I go back to the behavioural aspect. It is important that we understand the behavioural aspects. When people shop, and they take away a bag and groceries, by and large, with them, which they take into their home, I think we fail to understand what happens after that. That is where I would come back to say that we have to be careful that we are tackling what we think are the root problems here. In our view, the present proposal does not do it.

Q42 Dr Whitehead: Let's be clear about the issue of what is a carrier bag. This is a single-use carrier bag. But let us say that it is issued in a roll and produced to put vegetables in, in a supermarket, that is not a carrier bag, is it?

Barry Turner: No.

Q43 Dr Whitehead: So that is not covered by this potential arrangement?

Barry Turner: Nor should it be, in my view, because those bags have a different function. They are primarily used for fresh goods. You don't want cross-contamination occurring. Therefore, I cannot see any merit in applying a charge to that sort of bag. The bag in question that people seem to be focusing on is the carrier bag.

Q44 Dr Whitehead: So there is no intention of expanding the size of the bags that you get your vegetables in to look a little bit like carrier bags?

Barry Turner: The retailers can speak for themselves, but I would be astonished if that happened.

Andrew Opie: I do not think there is any intention. The Welsh and Northern Ireland regulations are clear what is and is not a bag down to a size. A small bag that you might put a greetings card in, for example, would be exempt. I think that works really well. Everyone understands that; the retailers understand it. After two years, the public seem to understand what is exempt and what isn't, and it works well.

Q45 Zac Goldsmith: Briefly returning to Mr Turner's comments about littering, I am interested to know whether the CPRE has any information on the rates of plastic bag littering since the Welsh scheme was introduced. Has that been measured?

Neil Sinden: We don't operate in Wales ourselves. Our sister body does and we could ask them that question but we don't have any data.

Q46 Zac Goldsmith: You are not aware of any decrease in littering?

Neil Sinden: We would expect to see a significant decrease and we would hope that we could get that data. If we can get it in time for your inquiry we will send it through to you.

Chair: Food for thought.

Q47 Katy Clark: At our next session in January we are taking evidence in more detail on the Government's proposed exemption of biodegradable bags. We have received quite strong representations on that issue. What do you think the impact of that exemption will be?

Barry Turner: We have had several meetings with DEFRA to try to understand what policy objective they are trying to achieve by exempting biodegradable bags and what sort of biodegradable bags would be permitted. At this point I am afraid we still do not understand the definition because there are all sorts of bags that can degrade in different environments. It is not quite clear what the Government is trying to achieve. It is a bit difficult to comment. It has long been accepted by industry that if you are going to have a biodegradable product in the marketplace then it is designed with a particular use in mind, such as industrial composting. It may be linked to food waste. It is designed with a very specific application in mind.

The possible danger of introducing products, which at this point are unknown because they have not been defined in terms of what type of product could be exempt, into the waste stream is that if it was not properly segregated there would be a danger of cross-contamination. It would potentially affect recycling of plastic film. As I say, there are lots of provisos in that. We don't know quite what the objective is. We don't know the definition of the product. I have heard discussion of a new product to a new standard that does not exist at present, so it is very difficult to comment in detail. What I find strange, however, is that this exemption is being proposed without us knowing quite what type of material they have in mind. I would expect that to be known, because it is very difficult to answer and provide evidence when you don't know really what you are providing evidence on. So there is a risk which cannot be quantified because we don't know what is being proposed.

Neil Sinden: The CPRE would echo those concerns apart from the definition problem, which I suspect you will need to look into in more detail. Our fear is that it will do

next to nothing to reduce waste, or indeed to reduce littering. There is plenty of evidence to demonstrate that even those bags that are considered to be the most biodegradable at the moment stay in the environment for many years. I think the Marine Conservation Society is also very concerned about the longevity of biodegradable plastic in the marine environment. We know from such bags in landfill that certain bags of that description cannot degrade anaerobically. So there are some real challenges. It goes back to the point that the BRC made earlier: we need this system to work well, and in order for it to work well it needs to be simple, to avoid confusing the consumer and to avoid creating problems in terms of the waste recycling challenges that the industry faces.

Q48 Katy Clark: One of the concerns that has been raised with us is that if biodegradable bags were used they would have an impact on both the UK plastic and recycling industries, because it would contaminate their products. If we were to go down the path of exemption, how would you define that exemption? What characteristics would you say the bag should have, or is your view that it just should not be exempt at all?

Barry Turner: There are two issues. There is the issue of whether it sends a confusing message to the consumer—is it consistent with other waste policies in terms of behaviour that we want to encourage? The other issue is the potential contamination of the recycling stream. Of the products that exist on the market today, the latest study that I am aware of, which has been done in Europe, seems to indicate that at very low levels, with products that exist on the market today, there is a deterioration in the performance of the recycled material. That is where we are today. If nothing else was to change and one of those products was to be adopted and it cross-contaminated the stream, it would definitely affect the recyclers' products and the performance of those recyclers.

Chair: I think we have reached the end of our questions, so I thank each and every one of you for coming along this afternoon. It will inform our inquiry. Thank you very much indeed.

Examination of Witnesses

Witnesses: **Dan Rogerson** MP, Minister for Water, Forestry, Rural Affairs and Resource Management, Defra, **Laura Denison**, Team Leader, Carrier bag policy, Defra, **Clare Hawley**, Deputy Director, Waste Strategy and Management, Defra, and **Karen Lepper**, Deputy Director, Waste Strategy and Management, Defra, gave evidence.

Q49 Chair: Minister, welcome. I know this is your first appearance before the Committee; I hope it will be one of many. I thank you for coming along a bit early. A warm welcome to you and your officials, who sat through the earlier panels. What we are trying to do with this short inquiry is scrutinise what the Government are doing and discover the purpose and main aim of the proposed levy or charge on plastic bags. At the outset, could you tell us whether it is driven by reducing littering or by other reasons? We would like to understand the main reason for the Department's bringing it forward now.

Dan Rogerson: I will start by saying thank you for carrying out this piece of work on the project. I saw that it resulted in a little bit of coverage this morning, which was interesting. It is a real pleasure to appear in front of you. You summoned me before my old

Committee, the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee, did, so you got that one in first.

In terms of the project, clearly littering was a key concern. That is something that we have all heard as MPs from our constituents, and as private individuals we see plastic bags lying around as a great source of annoyance. The project is also based on work already carried out in other jurisdictions, which has been helpful.

There are a number of things that we think we can achieve by doing this. For a start, we would expect that a plastic bag charge in England would reduce usage by about 60% to 80%, and that it would reduce the number of plastic bags littered—the key concern that you have already referred to. We would expect also that we could reduce greenhouse gas emissions of around 5 million to 8 million tonnes of CO₂, which is equivalent to permanently taking 1.7 million to 2.7 million cars off the road.

Q50 Chair: So do you see it as part of the climate change commitments in terms of carbon reduction?

Dan Rogerson: Absolutely. I think there are real gains to be made there as well. We also think, as a by-product, it channels some money to good causes as well and we will have to see how that money is used. There are a number of reasons for doing this. Littering would be the one that is most visible to people, but clearly there are some other real environmental benefits there as well.

Q51 Chair: Zac Goldsmith may come to this in a minute, but just in terms of the Department's timetable, and given that we will be taking an evidence session on this on, I think, 8 January, will you keep in touch with us if you were to make any announcements before our Report was published?

Dan Rogerson: Absolutely.

Q52 Chair: In terms of the objectives for doing what you are doing, I was interested that you mentioned climate change as well. I am just wondering, given that the importance of monitoring has emerged from our earlier sessions, what will success look like for you for this policy? How will you know—how will we know—whether or not this policy is successful? What is it that you are looking to measure and how will it be monitored?

Dan Rogerson: The clear driver is to reduce the number of single-use plastic carrier bags, so we will be able to see if there is a significant reduction in those. We are anticipating that it might be in the range of 60% to 80%, based on what has happened in other places. That would be a measure of success for us. In terms of the aims that we had, and the outcomes, obviously we would be able to make an assessment of those about the impact we have had on things such as CO₂ emissions and so on, but the easiest way to measure success is to look at the number of bags that are no longer going into circulation.

Q53 Chair: But that is not going to be linked to carbon reductions, is it?

Dan Rogerson: Yes. Sorry?

Q54 Chair: But that won't really be linked to carbon reduction.

Dan Rogerson: As I say, the main aim originally was around this issue of littering and the concern that we have all had on that. Clearly, there is another gain for us in terms of the reduction in carbon emissions, but the key measure of success will be how many fewer of these bags are going into circulation.

Q55 Chair: Given the timing of all this and the work that is going on within the European Commission, how does what the Government now propose to do now tie in with the European timetable?

Dan Rogerson: The timetable that we have set up is a public one, so you are aware of that—that we would anticipate the charges coming in in October 2015. There are different approaches across the European Union, and slightly different approaches within the United Kingdom about how this is managed. We do not anticipate any big problems for asking for what is being discussed in the European Union.

Q56 Chair: Are you a bit afraid that you want to do it before the European Commission requires it to be done?

Dan Rogerson: No. We want to get it done because it is a good thing to do. Obviously, it is nice to be ahead of the game in that sense, but this is something that was already being considered.

Laura Denison: It is not clear exactly what the time scales are for the Commission's proposal. It is very early days on that, so it is very likely that our charge will come into effect first.

Q57 Chair: Okay, but presumably your legislative timetable is clear?

Laura Denison: Yes.

Q58 Chair: So when can we expect whatever instrument is going to be used to bring it in?

Dan Rogerson: My understanding is that it will be secondary legislation, so obviously we wouldn't need primary legislation to do this. We would be seeking to do this in terms of regulation just before—

Laura Denison: October 2015. That is when it would be due to come into effect.

Q59 Chair: So this consultation is very short, isn't it? The current consultation that you have is a very short period of time.

Dan Rogerson: Well, we want to get this done, but we are obviously very keen to hear from people what their views are on the policy and if they think we could do things differently. I suppose we will explore this in questions about some of the aspects of the policy.

Q60 Chair: So will there be opportunity then for the recommendations from our Committee to actually influence before any final decision is made on the design of that statutory instrument?

Dan Rogerson: The statutory instrument will be published. It is not imminent; it will be sometime after. I assume, as you say, that you will be looking to publish the Report some time in the new year and therefore we will be able to respond to that.

Q61 Dr Whitehead: In your written evidence, there are repeated references to, particularly, the Welsh experience, and commendations of the decrease in single carrier bag use distribution, and the support of the public and the applicability of the experience. Why did you not decide simply to do that across England?

Dan Rogerson: To replicate the Welsh scheme?

Dr Whitehead: Indeed.

Dan Rogerson: I suppose there are a number of issues. First, with regard to small businesses, the Government has been clear that we don't want to put disproportionate burdens on small businesses, so in terms of the administration of the scheme that was a concern that we had; so that is a slightly different emphasis, I suppose. That is not to say that some small businesses that would be exempt could not choose to bring in a charge of their own. They can do that now anyway, but there are issues around, for example, the reporting of the charge and what happens to the money, which the bigger businesses will expect to do, but which we feel would be unfair to put on smaller businesses so that they can participate in the scheme. That is perhaps one difference, if you want to explore it.

Q62 Dr Whitehead: There are certain things that you haven't even put in the call for evidence, such as exemptions for different retailers and non-plastic materials. Indeed, CPRE is now campaigning for those exemptions to be de-exempted. Why weren't those in the call for evidence?

Dan Rogerson: Which particular exemptions are you concerned with there?

Dr Whitehead: The proposed exemptions for different retailers and for non-plastic materials in particular.

Dan Rogerson: In terms of the retailers, the main issue was on the scale of the business, I suppose. We were looking at this issue of proportionality and not wanting to press something on to smaller operators who might wish to participate, but not to treat them in the same way as the bigger retailers. The other issue you are raising there is, I guess, on materials. You mentioned the Welsh example. Another example to look at is the Irish experience, where they have exempted paper bags from the charge and the element of transfer from single-use plastic to single-use paper is very small, so we don't think that that is a huge problem and a huge risk. Certainly in terms of the large grocery retailers, we do not consider that that is something they will move to, but we will see what we hear back from people on this.

Q63 Dr Whitehead: Given that the introduction of the charge is essentially about, shall we say, changing behaviour and the change of assumptions—an assumption when you

go out to the shops as to what you are going to do—what advice have you sought from any authorities or experts in that area? Did you phone up the nudge unit and ask them what nudges you should be giving people?

Dan Rogerson: Their expertise is available across Government, which is quite useful, and our team in the Department includes a behavioural researcher, so we have some expertise there that we can draw on. But obviously the evidence, as we discussed, from other jurisdictions—Ireland and Wales—gives us a certain element of confidence on what the experience should be. We don't think it will necessarily be that different. We don't think that the slight differences you have mentioned between our scheme and the Welsh scheme will have a huge effect on the main element to the scheme, which is to drive people towards using bags more than once—reusable bags.

There is another issue around small businesses. Quite often, if people go into a larger business they will have planned that, so they will have those bags with them. We think there is an element that people might just nip into a smaller retailer and want to have a bag available, so there was a slight difference there in how we might treat the smaller businesses—the convenience stores and so on. But that is not to say that those stores cannot impose a charge if they want to; it is just that we wouldn't impose all the administration of the main scheme on them.

Q64 Dr Whitehead: A final thought on that. Given the exemptions that you have proposed, is there possibly going to be a rather ragged and confusing outcome? A number of smaller retailers are saying that actually they do not want to be exempted, and could they please be de-exempted? As you said, they would not be de-exempted, but they could charge if they wanted to. Then the other ones might not and, down the street, somebody might and so on. Do you think that that presents a problem? If so, are there any ways in which that could be resolved?

Dan Rogerson: The large volumes of these bags come from particular types of businesses, and that is where we think the big gain is to be made. As you said, it is absolutely fine for smaller businesses to opt in to doing this, so it is really about how the charge and the reporting requirements are handled. That is probably a key difference. But we hope that as people get more used to taking their bags with them wherever they go, yet other stores will feel able to do that and they will not be asked for bags quite so often.

Q65 Mrs Spelman: I am sure you saw the press coverage last week in which small businesses said that they want to be included in the scheme. We heard evidence from the British Retail Consortium that one of the key drivers behind that is that the measure is at nil cost to the retailer and may represent a saving to the small business because of not having to purchase lots of plastic bags in the first place. Having seen that, would you reconsider the exemption?

Dan Rogerson: As I was saying to Dr Whitehead, small businesses are absolutely free to participate and that is a great message: if they want to be part of it, that is really good. But it is this concern about what we are requiring the larger retailers to do with the money that they take in—we do not want to impose that on small businesses. Obviously, if on an optional basis they wanted to account for that and make a donation to a local charity or something,

that would be a wonderful thing to do, but, because of our concerns, we are not adding burdens to small businesses. We were very cautious about doing that.

What you say about the potential savings to them in not having to buy bags is absolutely true. That is another driver for them to do it, particularly if, as we hope, behaviour changes across society. But that administrative burden is the reason for the differentiation between the two types of business.

Q66 Zac Goldsmith: Following on from the previous question, are you aware of any small business federations or organisations that are actually asking to be exempted? I am yet to hear anyone come up with a contrary view—there appears to be demand at all scales. I do not want to push this point too far, but it would be interesting to know whether anyone has actively asked the Government for that exemption for smaller businesses.

Dan Rogerson: Not to my knowledge. No, we have not had any representations. I think it is more about the Government's approach to smaller businesses across Government.

Q67 Zac Goldsmith: But you are open to the idea that it could be to the advantage of smaller businesses to be included in this.

Dan Rogerson: It is open to them to participate on the basis I have described.

Q68 Zac Goldsmith: We have had a lot of submissions from recyclers, who are warning us that exempting biodegradable plastics will end up contaminating the recycling stream. Presumably, you have had the same submissions. How do you anticipate dealing with that?

Dan Rogerson: Obviously we are keen to hear, in response to our call for evidence, the views of people across all the manufacturing sectors about that. If we are to have an exemption, which is obviously our intention, to stimulate some kind of new industry for bags that are biodegradable, so that where bags are used, they are better by being biodegradable, rather than simply single-use plastic bags, we have to be sure that we have got the criteria right on those. For example, at the moment I think it would be fair to say that I cannot see a product on the market that would meet the aspiration that we would have for that exemption. So I think this is something that we would see coming forward. We have made provision for that to happen, but we don't see a product out there that meets those criteria.

Q69 Zac Goldsmith: If a consequence of that exemption policy is that you have an increase in biodegradable plastic in the market, is it possible to do that in such a way that does not enter the recycled plastic process?

Dan Rogerson: I certainly hope so. There are issues about clear labelling. There are bags on the market that are labelled as biodegradable in certain circumstances, and so on, so that is something that we need to be clear on.

Laura Denison: If I may add to that, we recognise that there is scientific debate about acceptable levels of contamination in the plastics recycling stream, and we have heard concerns from the industry about the extent to which biodegradable bags can cause these

problems. That is why, as part of our small business research initiative, we are looking for proposals for separation techniques as well as proposals for a better biodegradable bag. Our call for evidence also asked for evidence on this issue, so it is something that we will be looking at.

Q70 Zac Goldsmith: Minister, do you not have a slight concern that we are over-complicating something that has worked effectively in a much simpler form in other parts, not in least the Welsh example, as we have been hearing?

Dan Rogerson: Where we are going to have a smaller number of bags being used—but some bags will be used—it is right that we explore an opportunity to lessen the impact of whatever bags are used, so that we have the opportunity to have something that is better environmentally. If there is the opportunity for us to do something innovative in this country, we are always keen to leave the door open to that.

Q71 Zac Goldsmith: Your call for evidence talks about “a challenge to UK industry to look at innovative approaches to decrease the environmental impact”. To what extent do you see the charging scheme and the biodegradable exemption changing where bags are made? What impact will that have on how much we import and how much is domestic?

Dan Rogerson: The vast majority of bags at the moment are imported, so there are opportunities there. I wouldn’t like to put a figure on what that might be, because we are at an early stage of considering what those bags might be and how that industry might take off. If there is an opportunity to participate that we can extend to British business, that is something that we are keen to see. However, in terms of reducing the overall number of single-use plastic carrier bags, a lot of which are imported into the country, for all sorts of reasons—including the cost reasons that Mrs Spelman raised earlier on—cutting down on those imports might be beneficial to business as well.

Q72 Zac Goldsmith: Finally, the Chair mentioned earlier that we have an additional session on 8 January, when we will be hearing from recyclers and manufacturers about biodegradable qualities. We also understand that you are planning to award contracts for undertaking research into the environmental impacts of biodegradable bags and how that can be dealt with in the recycling process. Can you tell us when you are likely to make any announcements about that work and what the work is likely to cover?

Laura Denison: We are assessing the proposals at the moment, so we cannot comment on their nature at this stage. We hope to tell the successful bidders in January. I can’t say exactly when in January.

Q73 Chair: Is 6 January one of the dates, or would it be after?

Laura Denison: It would probably be after that, but I can’t say for certain. I don’t think we would have time to assess the proposals in full before 6 January.

Q74 Zac Goldsmith: Given that we are in the middle of this very short inquiry and have an additional session on 8 January, can we have an assurance from you that whatever

changes are made between now and then and whatever news emerges, you will keep this Committee informed—if you have any surprises?

Dan Rogerson: Yes, I will happily write to the Committee about any changes that we have before that time.

Q75 Martin Caton: The Climate Change Act doesn't allow for a mandatory charge for "bags for life", for the understandable reason of encouraging their use. But we have just heard evidence from a representative of the Welsh Assembly Government that, although it is not on a huge scale, something has started happening with their scheme. Some unscrupulous retailers are selling white plastic bags as "bags for life", for a penny or two pence, and people take them and chuck 'em away, as with the plastic bags that we are trying to use less. They are therefore thinking about changing the legislation to enable them to put a mandatory price on "bags for life". Would you consider that sort of measure?

Dan Rogerson: In terms of the regulations, we have to be quite clear about what bags we are talking about. Essentially, we are talking about bags that are exempt from the charge by being designated as "bags for life" and being seen to be heavier-duty. We would be quite clear in the regulation what would constitute a reusable bag and what would not. The real value of that item means that it is unlikely to be used in the sort of way that you describe. As I say, however, we are looking at examples from the Republic of Ireland and Wales where they have looked at these things. That is the sort of evidence we are taking into account. We would also be looking at any recommendations that come from this Committee, so if the issue comes up in the evidence, I would be grateful to hear about that and will consider it.

Q76 Caroline Lucas: I just want to ask about a slightly separate issue. In terms of being able to promote lasting behaviour change—indeed, behaviour change that might go wider than the plastic bag issue—have you considered what kind of public education campaign will run alongside what is, essentially, a financial disincentive? Can you tell us any thoughts that you might have had about making the most of such a measure via public education?

Dan Rogerson: As we move closer to implementation, we will obviously be talking to the retailers about how that information is shared, as we have done up to now, to make sure that people are aware of what is coming and that it does not come as a surprise to them.

Caroline Lucas: It's the why rather than the what that I am concerned about.

Dan Rogerson: Yes, I understand. You can have a discussion about why they are doing it, and I think that retailers will be keen to say why that is—that they are not doing it just because they want to pull in 5p for every bag. They will want to be clear about why it is happening as well. We want to be part of getting those messages across. It is really a good news story for everybody if we can change behaviour in that way.

Q77 Dr Offord: Presumably the 5p will be liable for VAT.

Dan Rogerson: That will be included in the 5p.

Q78 Dr Offord: So how much do you expect to raise?

Dan Rogerson: We think that the figure is about £70 million.

Karen Lepper: For charitable causes, not from VAT.

Dan Rogerson: Absolutely. For charitable causes. Were you talking about the tax take?

Q79 Dr Offord: Let me just wind back slightly, then. How much would you expect to raise in VAT?

Dan Rogerson: I am not quick enough with the maths, but if we are talking about £70 million for good causes, you can work it out.

Q80 Dr Offord: Okay. On those good causes, you mention in your evidence that you wish to follow the example set in Ireland, where the money goes to environmental organisations and charities. Will you legislate to ensure that the profits go to good causes?

Dan Rogerson: I have just been shown something that is far quicker than my mental maths on that figure. A total revenue of about £95 million should be coming in, so £70 million extra would go straight to good causes. The retail administration costs are about £6 million, leaving a VAT take of about £19 million.

Q81 Dr Offord: That is helpful. Thank you. Are you going to legislate to ensure that the money goes to good causes, or are you just going to encourage?

Dan Rogerson: We have made it clear what our expectation is, but we would not need to introduce primary legislation in order to do that. We are getting the scheme in place through secondary legislation, and there would also be reputational issues. However, we are expecting a report back on where that money has gone, and that will be published. That sort of thing is now commonplace for all sorts of things—for example, schools that get the pupil premium money say how they are using it to do what they are supposed to be doing with it, rather than just putting it into their core budget.

Q82 Dr Offord: I am sorry; just so that I understand, it would be possible for some convenience store, for example, to charge and to keep the money.

Dan Rogerson: It would, yes. However, they could optionally charge now and take that money.

Dr Offord: Yes, they can, you are right.

Dan Rogerson: In fact, some businesses do charge for carrier bags now.

Q83 Chair: It could be going anywhere though really, couldn't it? I am just wondering how this fits in with policies on transparency. Presumably, the Government would want to make sure that a clear line could be followed to see to which good causes the money was going. Look at the landfill tax, for example. That is quite heavily prescribed, whereas your money from this scheme could be going anywhere, couldn't it?

Dan Rogerson: The money from the landfill tax goes into the Treasury, generally.

Clare Hawley: This is why we publish. We expect people to be publishing if they are covered by these regulations.

Dan Rogerson: We would want to hear from them where the money has gone, and we will publish that.

Q84 Dr Offord: The VAT, as well, will go to the Treasury, generally.

Dan Rogerson: This is true.

Q85 Chair: Presumably, the disclosure and the reporting would enable you to have some idea of where the money is actually going.

Dan Rogerson: Yes, absolutely. That is what has happened in the Welsh example, so we would expect the same to happen in our scheme.

Q86 Chair: We are almost at the end of the session, which is timely because of the vote. In the run-up to Christmas, with the shopping currently going on, is there a message from the Government about the importance of this measure that you are introducing? In this very short time period for consultation, do you think that there is enough understanding for there to be an informed debate about the various objectives that you have?

Dan Rogerson: There are other opportunities. When we go forward with the regulation, we would consult on the detail of that as well. All the evidence we have had seems to show that there is great support for doing this. The success of the scheme in other places shows that people are supportive of the concept, but we want to make sure that we get all these things right. You raised issues about where the money goes to good causes, and that will be part of winning people's support. There are the benefits I listed at the beginning, so we hope to see a great deal of support for it.

Chair: On that note, Minister, I thank you and your colleagues for coming along. We wish you all the very best for Christmas and the new year. We shall look forward to receiving the Government response to our report after we submit it.