

THE BIG BAG BAN



George Eustice MP
Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs
House of Commons
London
SW1A 0AA

30 April 2021

Dear George,

Today, we ask the UK government to begin proceedings for an outright ban on single-use carrier bags; a ban that is inclusive of traditional single-use plastic bags and Bags for Life. We also ask for more accountability and transparency, from the Government and from major supermarkets, on how plastic bags are sold and how proceeds from plastic bag charges are used.

Countries including Kenya and Bangladesh, as well as a growing number of US states, have already passed legislative bans on all single-use bags. With 'the elimination of all avoidable plastic waste' as a tenet of the Government's 25 Year Plan to Improve the Environment, the plastic waste contributed by supermarkets and other retailers cannot endure.

We welcomed the Government's effort to reduce plastic waste by introducing a 5p single-use plastic bag charge in 2015. However, reports on its success are misleading. Though it is claimed that the levy has led to a 95% cut in plastic bag sales in supermarkets, statistics only account for sales of single-use carrier bags and make no mention of the huge increase in 'Bag for Life' sales since 2015.

Since the 5p levy was introduced, **single-use bag sales have fallen, but Bag for Life sales have rocketed and continue to increase year on year** in many supermarkets. One major supermarket saw an almost tenfold increase in Bag for Life sales from 3.5 million in 2018 to 34 million in 2019. Additionally, the average UK household brought home 57 Bags for Life in 2019 alone, representing a 65% increase since 2017.

These numbers suggest that the problem of plastic waste in supermarkets has not been fixed; it has simply shifted to evade the reach of legislation. Bags for Life have replaced single-use bags at the point of sale to generate an additional revenue stream for retailers, and the VAT from these sales means the Government benefits from this.

The environmental footprint of misused Bags for Life is concerning. It is estimated that these items can contain more than three times as much plastic as a single-use version. With this in mind, the 1.58 billion Bags for Life and 564 million single-use bags issued by



retailers in 2019-20 mean overall plastic consumption for carrier bags is a significant contributor to the pressing issue of plastic pollution, which the Government has identified as a priority in its 25 Year Plan.

Equally alarming is the ambiguity surrounding how proceeds from Bags for Life sales are distributed. In 2015, the Government said it expected the 5p plastic bag levy to be donated by retailers to good causes that benefit society and the environment. Several retailers have since eliminated single-use 5p carrier bags for customers, meaning Bags for Life are the only option if a customer fails to bring their own bag.

Since retailers are not required to donate the proceeds from Bag for Life sales to good causes, the switch from single-use bags to Bags for Life has enabled a plummet in charitable donations from major supermarkets. According to data from Defra, the top 10 supermarket retailers donated £65,122,307 generated from single-use bag sales to good causes in 2016-17. In 2019-20, this fell to £9,186,885.

Data on the proceeds raised from Bags for Life is not available from all major supermarkets, nor are details of the net proceeds or donations. There is a clear risk that retailers are profiting from Bag for Life sales, while members of the public purchase them with the misconception that, though they are buying plastic, their money is going to good causes.

These statistics bring us to the proposed 10p plastic bag levy. Because the proposed levy only affects single-use bags and not Bags for Life, it means the latter can continue to: a) be sold as single-use alternatives, b) contribute to the pressing problem of plastic waste, and c) be misleadingly sold without requiring retailers to report on their proceeds.

It's clear that bolder and more ambitious legislative action is urgently needed to fix this issue. This is why the undersigned are calling for an outright ban on plastic bags.

Yours sincerely,

Elizabeth Carr, Founder, Planet Patrol
John Sauven, Executive Director, Greenpeace
Lord Ravensdale, Director, Peers for the Planet
Lord Cameron of Dillington, Vice-Chair, Environment APPG
Baroness Lister of Burtersett
Sir Peter Bottomley, MP for Worthing West
Sarah Olney, MP for Richmond Park
Professor Daniel Parsons, University of Hull
Professor Brendan Godley, University of Exeter



Dr Thomas Stanton, Nottingham Trent University
Professor Jamie Woodward, The University of Manchester
Dr Mark Hartl, Heriot-Watt University
Professor Alice Roberts, University of Birmingham
Professor Sascha Hooker, University of St Andrews
Dr Winnie Courtene-Jones, University of Plymouth
Dr Christian Dunn, Director of the Plastic Research Centre of Wales
Maria Westerbos, Founder, The Plastic Soup Foundation
Tessa Clarke, Co-founder, OLIO
Saasha Celestial-One, Co-founder, OLIO
Trewin Restorick, Founder, Hubbub
Natalie Fee, Founder of City to Sea
Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall, Ethical Chef and Environmentalist
Fearne Cotton, Presenter and Environmental Activist
Thandiwe Newton OBE, Actress and Environmental Activist
Bonnie Wright, Actress and Activist
Laura Whitmore, Presenter and Activist
Julia Bradbury, TV presenter and Environmental Activist
Livia Firth MBE, Sustainability Entrepreneur
Mikaela Loach, Climate Justice Activist
Lady Amelia Windsor, Sustainability Editor, Talia
Daisy Kendrick, Author and Founder, Ocean Generation
Ella Daish, Environmentalist
Noga Levy-Rapoport, Activist, UK Student Climate Network
Melissa Hemsley, Author and Sustainability Champion
Jasmine Hemsley, Author and Sustainability Champion
Paul Gardiner, CEO of Mantis Collection
Wilson Oryema, Artist and Writer
Clara Paget, Project Zero Ambassador
Aldo Kane, Explorer
Laura Crane, British Surfing Champion
Rosanna Falconer, Sustainability Entrepreneur
Sara Vaughan, Chief Purpose and Sustainability Advisor to Marie Claire
Besma Whayeb, Founder, Ethical Influencers
Gina Bradbury Fox, The Outdoor Guide
Elizabeth Bennett, Journalist and Editor
Catherine Capon, Eco Tourism Entrepreneur
Sophie Benson, Journalist and Writer
Iris Law, Sustainable Fashion Advocate
Tolmeia Gregory, Artist and Climate Justice Activist
Zanna Van Dijk, Travel Blogger and Environmentalist