

Executive Summary (Changes in Attitudes and Behaviour)

This report presents the results of an ESRC-funded research project that examined the behavioural and attitudinal impacts of the English plastic bag charge that was introduced in October 2015. The project used a mixed-methods longitudinal approach, and included a national survey, a diary-interview study, and supermarket observation study. The key results for the three elements are summarised below:

The longitudinal survey

- The longitudinal survey was developed to examine changes in behaviours and attitudes following the introduction of the English plastic bag charge.
- A representative sample of the public in England, Wales, and Scotland were surveyed one month before (n=3,066), and then one month (n=2,005) and six months (n=1,230) after the introduction of the English plastic bag charge.
- We find an immediate change in bag use after the charge was implemented. Whereas before the charge about 1 in 4 respondents from England “Often/Always” took single-use plastic bags doing their main and top-up food shop, this fell to around 1 in 10 respondents one month after the charge was introduced.
- In contrast, before the charge 70% of respondents from England “Often/Always” took their own shopping bags, which increased to 83% of respondents one month after the charge, and to 93% of respondents six months after the charge was introduced.
- The analyses indicate that the introduction of the plastic bag charge led to a substantial increase in people taking their own bags, independent of age, gender, or income. Although some differences remained between different groups, similar increases were observed for all groups considered.
- A small majority (52%) already supported a 5p plastic bag charge before one was introduced in England. Support for a charge further increased to 60% one month after, and to 62% six months after the English charge was introduced. An increase in support was observed for both men and women, as well as for different age and income groups.
- Support for a 5p plastic bag charge also increased in Wales and Scotland over the same period, with similar levels of support observed in Scotland as in England (61%), and very high levels of support in Wales (80%).
- Not only did people become more supportive of a plastic bag charge after its introduction, they also became more supportive of other charges to reduce waste. In particular, those who changed their opinion about the plastic bag charge also changed their opinion about other charges.
- Respondents from all three UK countries see plastic bag charge as a highly effective policy to reduce plastic bag use. Before the introduction of the English plastic bag charge, 76% of respondents from England agreed that it would encourage people to use fewer plastic bags. This increased to 80% six months after the charge was introduced.

- Respondents from England became far less sceptical about the charge after it was introduced. Before its introduction, two thirds of respondents from England (65%) thought that stores would use the charge to make more money. This decreased to 47% one month after the charge, and to 39% six months after the charge was introduced.
- No evidence was found to suggest that the bag charge led to any changes in shopping behaviour.
- There is evidence of Bags for Life accumulating in people's homes, with people in Wales having the largest numbers of Bags for Life at home.

The diary-interview study

- The diary-interview study aimed to provide an in-depth account of the process of behaviour and attitude change. Semi-structured diaries were followed by semi-structured one-hour interviews before (n=57 and n=52, respectively) and after (n=45 and n=43, respectively) the plastic bag charge was introduced in England. The three samples in England, Wales and Scotland were balanced in terms of age, gender, socio-economic profile, urban/rural location, and were geographically varied.
- The English plastic bag charge was highly effective at reducing the strength and automaticity of habitual use of single-use plastic bags, and replacing it by a planned and more conscious use of Bags for Life. People changed their behaviour for both financial and environmental reasons.
- There was a high level of awareness in England of the plastic bag charge coming into effect, and participants adapted easily and quickly to the charge. Support for the charge was already high before its introduction, and increased after the charge came into effect, most likely due to the understanding of its environmental benefits. A majority of participants in the three countries supported a 'blanket', exemption-free plastic bag charge.
- After the introduction of the charge in England, people experienced more encouragement from supermarkets to reuse bags. They also saw less need for both single-use plastic bags and plastic Bags for Life to be provided in supermarkets. This was corroborated by the interviews conducted in Wales and Scotland.
- Most participants stopped using single-use plastic bags as bin liners after the plastic bag charge was introduced in England. However, in Wales and Scotland a small number of people continued to use both single-use plastic bags and Bags for Life as bin liners.
- After the introduction of the charge in England, there was an increased awareness of the environmental impact of household plastic waste, and interview participants became more supportive of hypothetical charges to reduce waste. Support for a hypothetical rise in fuel duties was lower due to its feared impact on families' budgets, a lack of suitable alternatives to driving, and a need to develop the use of renewable energy sources.

The supermarket observation study

- We observed supermarket shoppers in England and Wales in July 2015 (n=819 and n=818, respectively) and in July 2016 (n=984 and n=1,143, respectively), exiting four supermarkets in both Cardiff and in Bristol.
- In England, over half of all shoppers (57%) were seen using single-use plastic bags before the charge was introduced. This fell to just 21% after the charge was introduced.
- In England, about 29% of all shoppers were seen using Bags for Life before the charge was introduced. This doubled to 58% after the charge was introduced.
- After the English plastic bag charge was introduced, bag use in England matched observed bag use in Wales, where a bag charge was already in place for several years.
- In England, no substantial changes were seen in the number of shoppers using personal bags (e.g., rucksacks), and no changes in the proportion of people carrying items loose without a bag, suggesting that single-use plastic bags have been replaced by Bags for Life.

Conclusions

Overall, the research has shown that the English plastic bag charge has made a strong and positive impact on people's behaviours and attitudes.

The research found that the charge was effective at breaking old habits, and that it became more popular as people adapted to the policy. Evidence was also found that the charge increased environmental awareness and the acceptability of other environmental policies.

The success of the plastic bag charge in effectively changing plastic bag use and increasing support for other charges to reduce waste suggests that similar policies could also be successfully implemented, such as a deposit return scheme on plastic bottles or a charge on disposable coffee cups.