

# Science for Environment Policy

## Holistic approach needed to reduce consumption of lightweight plastic carrier bags

**Reducing plastic carrier bag consumption in different EU Member States** requires different approaches and combinations of measures, according to a new study. The authors studied consumption and littering levels across Europe in relation to national plastic bag consumption reduction policy options, and found that there is not one specific solution for both of these factors, nor a single solution that can be used in all Member States. They suggest a holistic approach and additional research into consumer or stakeholder behaviour is needed.

**Member States** already have different national policies in place to limit the consumption of plastic bags. On 29 April 2015, the European Parliament and the Council adopted Directive (EU) 2015/720 amending the [Packaging and Packaging Waste Directive](#) with regard to reducing the consumption of lightweight plastic carrier bags. Member States must take measures, by 26 November 2016 at the latest, to reduce the consumption these bags, including either the setting of a maximum annual consumption level of 90 bags per person by 2019 (and of 40 bags by 2025), or stop retailers giving away free bags altogether by the end of 2018.

The authors analysed the impact of existing measures implemented to reduce plastic carrier bag consumption in different Member States. They considered national legislation, voluntary initiatives and economic measures, and assessed the impact of different measures on levels of plastic bag consumption and littering. The results suggest that there is no obvious pattern to the types of policies that work in different Member States.

Belgium, Denmark, France, Ireland and the Netherlands had existing national legislation to reduce the consumption of carrier bags and in 2011/12 consumers in those countries consumed fewer bags than the average. However, in Estonia, Italy, Romania, Spain, Sweden and the UK, consumption was average, and in the Czech Republic and Latvia higher than average, despite national legislation to reduce bag consumption. Some Member States that had average consumption levels had high littering rates, while others had low littering rates.

So far, the most stringent measures have been adopted in Ireland and Italy. In Ireland, a tax on plastic carrier bags was introduced in 2002 and consumers now pay to purchase them from retailers. By 2011/12, consumption and littering in Ireland had dropped to some of the lowest levels in Europe, behind only Denmark and Finland. In Italy, retailers were banned from giving out plastic carrier bags in 2011, with an exemption for biodegradable or compostable bags. The data used in the study derive from the official report conducted for the European Commission DG Environment, which stretches to 2012, and shows that Italy used an average number of plastic carrier bags compared to other Member States, while littering was high.

Countries where there are voluntary initiatives to reduce plastic carrier bag consumption have also had mixed success in achieving lower usage and littering. The same is true of countries where fees or taxes have been introduced. In Estonia, for example, charges are applied both directly as consumer fees as well as indirectly as disposal charges for packaging waste, but usage is still considered high compared with other Member States.

According to the authors, their study shows that there is no single solution that will reduce plastic carrier bag consumption and littering in all Member States. They say that a more 'holistic' approach is required for designing each country's national strategy, combining — apart from the traditional evaluations — consumer and stakeholder research with policy measures appropriate for each specific country and interim evaluations of the impact of those measures covering factors from interdisciplinary sectors, rather than a blanket ban or tax introduced without prior research. Consumer behaviour and acceptance in relation to plastic bag policies must be considered an important issue for further research.



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