

# Northern Ireland Carrier Bag Levy, Annual Statistics 2019/20



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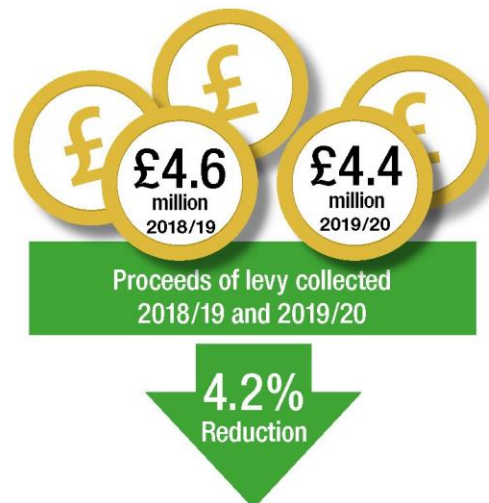
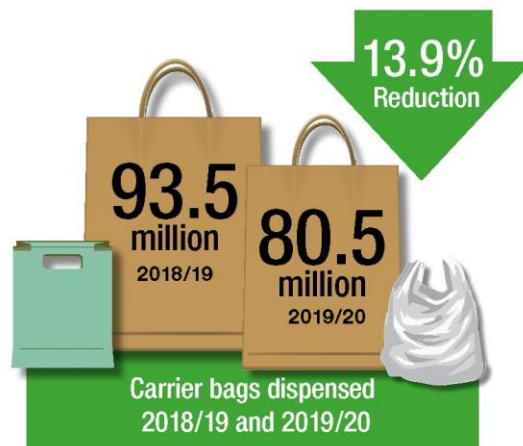
Department of  
**Agriculture, Environment  
and Rural Affairs**

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# Northern Ireland Carrier Bag Levy Annual Statistics 2019/20



An Official Statistics publication

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## Contact

Statistics and Analytical Services  
Branch, Department of Agriculture,  
Environment and Rural Affairs  
Room 816, Dundonald House  
Upper Newtownards Road  
Belfast BT4 3SB

**Statistician:** Conor McCormack

**Telephone:** 028 9052 5450

**Email:** [env.stats@daera-ni.gov.uk](mailto:env.stats@daera-ni.gov.uk)

**Date of publication:** 27 August 2020

## Key points

- During the seventh year of operation, 80.5 million carrier bags were dispensed by retailers under the carrier bag levy in Northern Ireland.
- This was 13.9% lower than the previous year, with 13 million fewer bags dispensed. This decrease can be attributed to a decrease in lower rate bags dispensed (36.7% decrease). The number of upper rate bags dispensed increased by 27.6% between 2018/19 and 2019/20.
- The number of carrier bags dispensed in 2019/20 is still markedly lower than the baseline figure prior to the introduction of the levy, which was estimated at 300 million bags in 2012. Year 7 of the 5p levy saw a reduction in bag numbers of 73.2% compared to the baseline.
- The proceeds of the levy for 2019/20 totalled £4.4 million, a decrease of £0.2 million (4.2%) from the previous year.

**Coverage:** Northern Ireland  
**Frequency:** Annual  
**Reporting Period:** 1 April 2019 to 31 March 2020, referred to as 2019/20  
**Next update:** Data for 2020/21 will be published in August 2021

**URL:** [www.daera-ni.gov.uk/articles/northern-ireland-carrier-bag-levy-statistics](http://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/articles/northern-ireland-carrier-bag-levy-statistics)

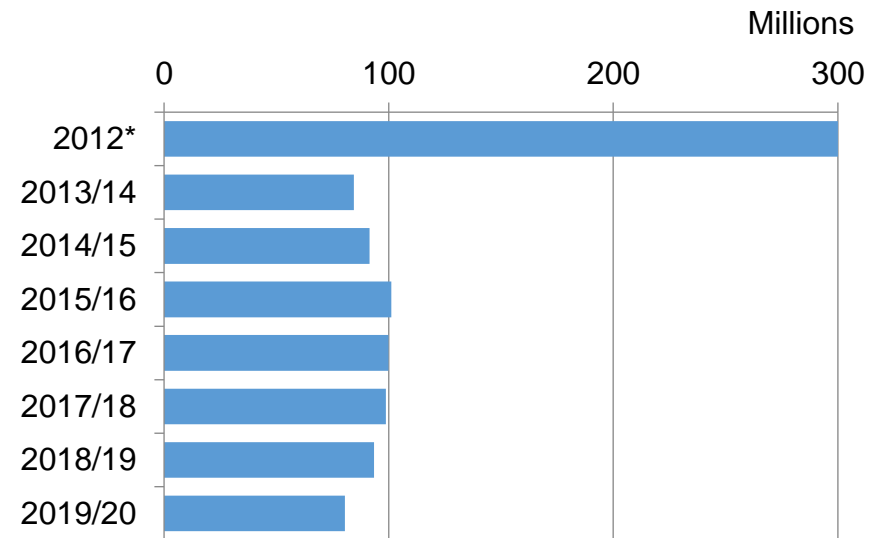
## Introduction

The purpose of this publication is to report on the number of carrier bags dispensed in Northern Ireland in the financial year 2019/20. The figures relate to the number of bags dispensed by retailers between 1 April 2019 and 31 March 2020 as notified to the Department by 30 June 2020. Users of this report include government policy makers, local government officials, retailers, general public, media and environmental organisations.

## Overview

- During the seventh year of operation, 80.5 million carrier bags were dispensed by retailers under the carrier bag levy in Northern Ireland.
- This was 13.9% lower than the previous year, with 13 million fewer bags dispensed. This decrease can be attributed to a decrease in lower rate bags dispensed (36.7% decrease). The number of upper rate bags dispensed increased by 27.6% between 2018/19 and 2019/20.
- The number of carrier bags dispensed in 2019/20 is still markedly lower than the baseline figure prior to the introduction of the levy, which was estimated at 300 million bags in 2012. Year 7 of the 5p levy saw a reduction in bag numbers of 73.2% compared to the baseline figure which meant approximately 219.5 million fewer bags in circulation in 2019/20 and an estimated 1.5 billion fewer since the introduction of the levy.
- The proceeds of the levy for 2019/20 totalled £4.4 million, a decrease of £0.2 million (4.2%) from the previous year. Proceeds are taken from audited Departmental financial accounts and are not Official Statistics. They cannot be calculated from bag usage figures due to differences in timing and recording.

**Figure 1: Carrier bags dispensed by year**  
Northern Ireland, 2012 to 2019/20



\*estimated figure for 2012 calendar year

Note: The scope of the carrier bag levy was extended during the last quarter of 2014/15. This contributed to the increases shown in reported bag numbers after 2013/14.

## Background to Regulations

The Single Use Carrier Bags Charge Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2013 were made on 15 January 2013 and came into operation on 8 April 2013. From that date, all sellers of goods in Northern Ireland had to charge their customers at least 5 pence (“the levy”) for each single use carrier bag supplied new. From 19 January 2015, the levy was extended to all carrier bags with a retail price of less than 20 pence, whether they are considered single use or reusable.

- Bags at the **lower rate** are those costing the customer only the 5p levy.
- Bags at the **upper rate** are those which have had a price added by the retailer in advance of the 5p levy being applied.

Prior to 19 January 2015 the levy covered single use carrier bags, typically costing 5 pence. Retailers could charge more than 5 pence however this was uncommon with upper rate bags accounting for just 3% of total bags dispensed. After the levy was extended the numbers of upper rate bags increased as more bags fell within the scope of the Regulations. The extension specifically targeted all carrier bags with a retail price of less than 20 pence, which included lower-priced reusable bags. The number of upper rate carrier bags dispensed between January and March 2015 i.e. immediately after the extension, was 2.4 million bags, approximately 1.8 million greater than each of the three preceding quarters. Following the change in regulations the number of upper rate bags dispensed ranged between 2.8 to 3.4 million per quarter in 2015/16 and 2016/17. However, since then, there has been a strong increase in the number of upper rate bags with an average of 10.6 million bags dispensed per quarter in 2019/20. It should also be noted that a number of retailers, as part of their internal pricing policy, increased the price of their low cost reusable bags to 20 pence or above, thereby ensuring such bags were outside the scope of the levy.

From 1<sup>st</sup> April 2020, in response to the Covid-19 pandemic the Carrier Bags Charge Regulations across Northern Ireland were temporarily amended to exempt carrier bags used for home delivery as part of a grocery service from the levy. This exemption is due to expire on 30<sup>th</sup> September 2020 but will remain under review.

The Continuous Household Survey observed an increase in individuals who are concerned about the environment compared to last year. A total of 78% of respondents in the 2019/20 survey were reported to be very/fairly concerned about environmental issues, which was slightly higher than the 75% reported to be very/fairly concerned about the environment in 2018/19. The survey also showed that most respondents selected that they had reused plastic bags or used a reusable bag when questioned on positive environmental actions in the last 12 months. In the 2019/20 survey a total of 83% respondents claimed to reuse plastic bags which is lower than the 2018/19 figure of 85% but remains the highest positive environmental action taken.

## Seasonal Variation and Trends

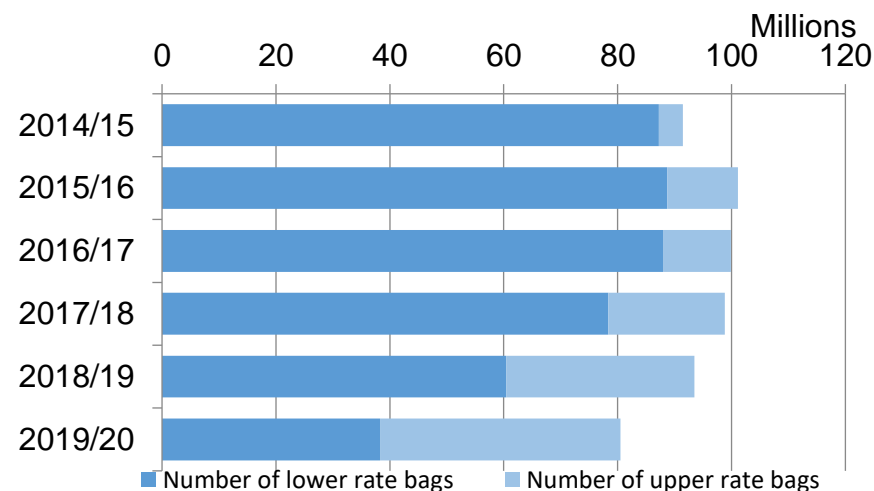
The total number of bags dispensed in 2019/20 was 80.5 million which is an overall decrease of 13.9% and equates to 13 million fewer bags dispensed since 2018/19. This decrease can mainly be attributed to lower rate bags which fell by 36.7% to 38.3 million bags but is offset by an increase in the number of upper rate bags by 27.6% to 42.2 million bags.

Until this latest year the majority of bags dispensed in Northern Ireland have been lower rate bags. In 2019/20, 52% (42.2 million) of bags were upper rate bags. Figure 2 illustrates how the proportion of upper rate bags has been increasing over time. The proportion of upper rate bags dispensed has increased from 5% in 2014/15 to 52% in 2019/20.

In 2019/20 retailers in Northern Ireland dispensed 22.1 million bags during quarter 1 (April to June 2019), 21.2 million during quarter 2 (July to September 2019) and 22.1 million during quarter 3 (October to December 2019). The number of bags dispensed during quarter 4 (January to March 2020) reduced to 15 million. As shown in Figure 3, the pattern has changed slightly in 2019/20 as the expected peak in quarter 3 was not as pronounced as in previous years while quarter 4 shows a larger than usual drop in bags dispensed. In the past two years there has been a large increase in the number of upper rate bags dispensed in quarter 3 but not so in 2019/20. Some retailers have increased the price of their bags to 20 pence and above which is outside the scope of the levy, retaining the proceeds, leading to a reduction in bags declared. There had also been some reduction in lower rate bags used for home deliveries as retailers switched from using bags to using crates for this service. The changes in the latest quarter may also be the result of the exceptional circumstances experienced during the initial Covid-19 lockdown period leading to the closure of many retail outlets and the restriction of movements which not only reduced the number of bags being dispensed but impacted on retailers making returns.

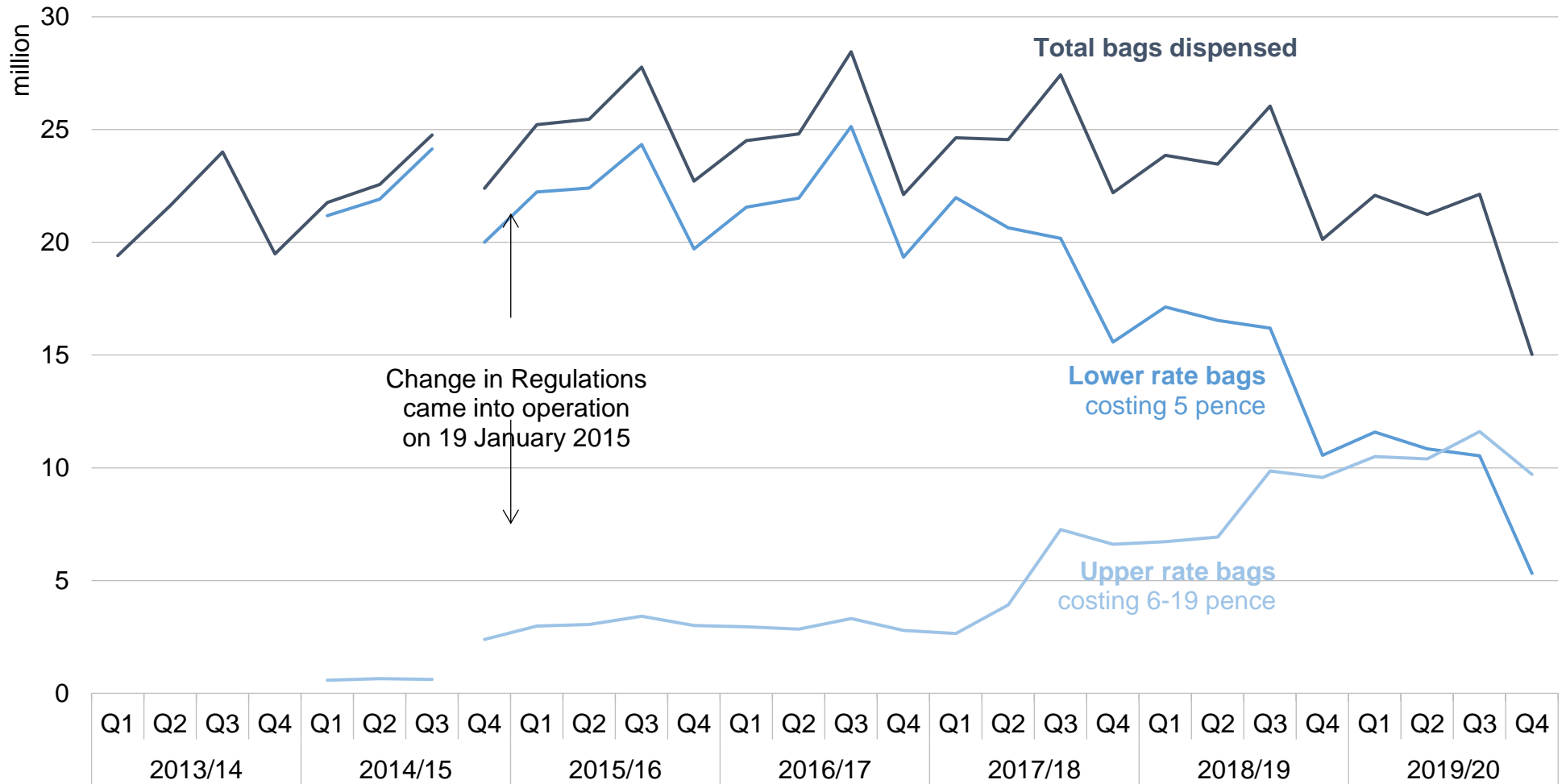
Looking at the percentage change compared to the same quarters last year, all showed reductions for total bag usage with the largest decrease in quarter 4 (25.4%) and the smallest in quarter 1 (7.4%). Lower rate bags followed a similar trend with all four quarters decreasing compared to last year. Quarter 4 had the largest decrease with numbers almost halving to 5.3 million with a major part of this reduction related to covid-19 lockdown restrictions as described earlier. Quarter 1 had the smallest decrease in lower rate bags at 32.4%. Upper rate bags showed the opposite trend with all quarters recording an increased number of bags compared to 2018/19. The largest increase was in quarter 1 where upper rate bag numbers increased by 56.2%.

**Figure 2: Carrier bags dispensed by rate**  
Northern Ireland, 2014/15 to 2019/20





**Figure 3: Number of carrier bags dispensed by quarter, year and rate**  
Northern Ireland, Q1 2013/14 to Q4 2019/20



## Tables

**Table 1: Total carrier bags dispensed by quarter and year**

Northern Ireland, 2013/14 to 2019/20

Quarter	2013/14	2014/15	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	<i>Millions</i>	
								Difference in latest year	Percentage change in latest year
April to June	19.414	21.763	25.222	24.508	24.635	23.854	22.083	-1.772	-7.4%
July to September	21.627	22.566	25.456	24.812	24.557	23.466	21.238	-2.228	-9.5%
October to December	24.005	24.763	27.764	28.452	27.432	26.046	22.133	-3.913	-15.0%
January to March	19.486	22.389	22.712	22.122	22.195	20.133	15.027	-5.106	-25.4%
<b>Total</b>	<b>84.532</b>	<b>91.482</b>	<b>101.154</b>	<b>99.894</b>	<b>98.819</b>	<b>93.499</b>	<b>80.481</b>	<b>-13.018</b>	<b>-13.9%</b>

*As notified to the Department by 30th June each financial year.*

**Table 2: Lower rate carrier bags dispensed by quarter and year**

Northern Ireland, 2013/14 to 2019/20

Quarter	2013/14	2014/15	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	<i>Millions</i>	
								Difference in latest year	Percentage change in latest year
April to June	n/a	21.184	22.233	21.559	21.982	17.134	11.589	-5.545	-32.4%
July to September	n/a	21.915	22.401	21.960	20.638	16.542	10.838	-5.704	-34.5%
October to December	n/a	24.144	24.341	25.135	20.169	16.191	10.527	-5.665	-35.0%
January to March	n/a	20.000	19.708	19.337	15.581	10.557	5.315	-5.242	-49.7%
<b>Total</b>	<b>n/a</b>	<b>87.242</b>	<b>88.683</b>	<b>87.991</b>	<b>78.371</b>	<b>60.425</b>	<b>38.269</b>	<b>-22.156</b>	<b>-36.7%</b>

*As notified to the Department by 30th June each financial year.*

*Bags at the **lower rate** are those only costing the customer the 5p levy.*



**Table 3: Upper rate carrier bags dispensed by quarter and year**

Northern Ireland, 2013/14 to 2019/20

Quarter								<i>Millions</i>	
	2013/14	2014/15	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	Difference in latest year	Percentage change in latest year
April to June	n/a	0.579	2.989	2.949	2.653	6.720	10.494	3.774	56.2%
July to September	n/a	0.651	3.055	2.851	3.919	6.924	10.400	3.476	50.2%
October to December	n/a	0.620	3.423	3.318	7.263	9.854	11.606	1.752	17.8%
January to March	n/a	2.389	3.004	2.785	6.614	9.575	9.711	0.136	1.4%
<b>Total</b>	<b>n/a</b>	<b>4.239</b>	<b>12.471</b>	<b>11.903</b>	<b>20.448</b>	<b>33.074</b>	<b>42.212</b>	<b>9.138</b>	<b>27.6%</b>

*As notified to the Department by 30th June each financial year.**Bags at the **upper rate** are those which have had a price added by the retailer in advance of the 5p levy being applied.***Table 4: Proportion of upper and lower rate bags by year**

Northern Ireland, 2014/15 to 2019/20

	2014/15	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20
Lower rate bags	95%	88%	88%	79%	65%	48%
Upper rate bags	5%	12%	12%	21%	35%	52%
<b>Total bags (Millions)</b>	<b>91.482</b>	<b>101.154</b>	<b>99.894</b>	<b>98.819</b>	<b>93.499</b>	<b>80.481</b>

*As notified to the Department by 30th June each financial year.*

From 19 January 2015 the levy was extended hence lower and upper rate didn't apply prior to this. See the Background to Regulations section for more information. The effect of this change on the numbers dispensed is discussed in more detail in the 2015/16 carrier bag levy report, available from [www.daera-ni.gov.uk/articles/northern-ireland-carrier-bag-levy-statistics](http://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/articles/northern-ireland-carrier-bag-levy-statistics).

These tables are also available in spreadsheet format [www.daera-ni.gov.uk/articles/northern-ireland-carrier-bag-levy-statistics](http://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/articles/northern-ireland-carrier-bag-levy-statistics).

## Background information

1. This is the seventh year of the carrier bag levy in Northern Ireland. These are the final official statistics for 2019/20. The Department intends to publish 2020/21 figures in August 2021. [Statistical reports](#) from previous years can be accessed online.
2. Bags which are exempt from the levy, such as those used solely to contain unpackaged raw food or hot foods / hot drinks, are not included in the data. Retailers are not required to record this information. The main exemptions are listed on carrier bag levy section of nidirect and the full list is available from Schedule 1 of the Regulations.
  - <https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/carrier-bag-levy>
  - <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/nisr/2013/4/regulation/1/made>
  - [http://www.legislation.gov.uk/nia/2014/7/pdfs/nia\\_20140007\\_en.pdf](http://www.legislation.gov.uk/nia/2014/7/pdfs/nia_20140007_en.pdf)
3. The figures are based on data supplied by 2,332 retailers in Northern Ireland as notified to the Department by 30 June 2020. Note that this is not the number of actual premises at which carrier bags are dispensed, as one retailer can submit returns for more than one outlet.
4. The Department's estimate of the number of bags dispensed in 2012 (300 million) is derived from UK-wide Waste & Resources Action Programme (WRAP) data for 2008. The data were adjusted to take account of reductions in bag usage as a result of voluntary retailer measures since 2008.
5. The figures presented in the release will not equate precisely to the total bags dispensed in the year due to the 30 June cut-off date applied for the production of Official Statistics. For each year reported it has been estimated that the number of bags notified by 30 June has been around 3% lower than the actual total number of bags dispensed in that year.
6. Company returns are audited by Carrier Bag Levy Team, which has responsibility for administration and collection of the levy and ensuring that sellers comply with the Regulations. Guidance on carrier bag levy enforcement is available from [nidirect](#). Initial validation checks are carried out by Carrier Bag Levy Team with further validation by Statistics and Analytical Service Branch in DAERA. Any discrepancies are queried with Carrier Bag Levy Team. More information on the quality assurance of these statistics is available in the [data quality report](#).
7. These statistics are released according to the [Statement of Compliance](#) with the Pre-release access to Official Statistics Order (NI) 2009. Official Statistics are produced to a high professional standard. They undergo regular quality assurance reviews to ensure that they meet customer needs. They are produced free from any political interference. As we want to engage with users of our statistics, we invite you to feedback your comments on this publication. Contact details are included on page one.

Policy, Economics and Statistics Division  
Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs  
Dundonald House  
Upper Newtownards Road  
Ballymiscaw  
BELFAST BT4 3SB



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