

# Northern Ireland Carrier Bag Levy, Annual Statistics 2020/21



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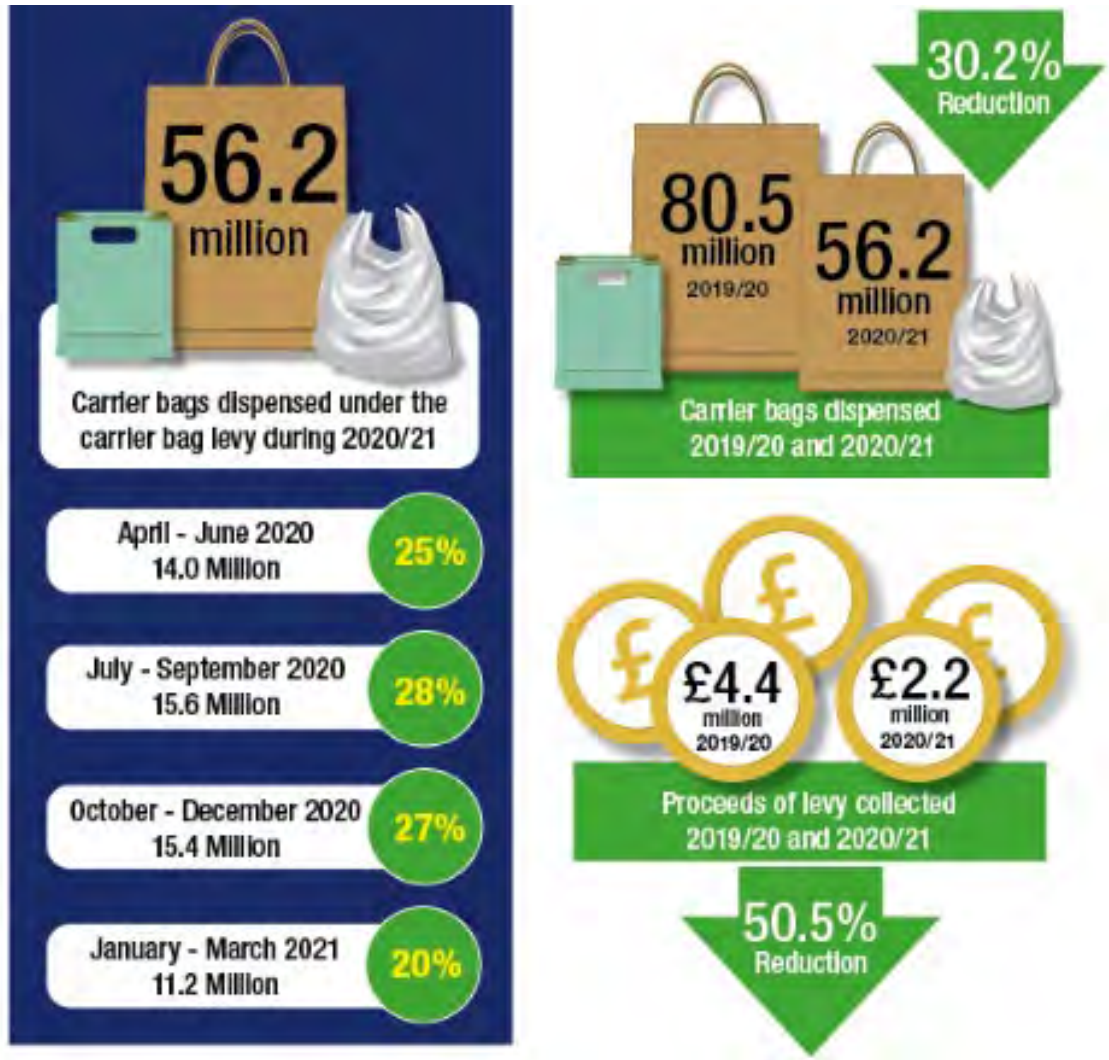
Department of  
**Agriculture, Environment  
and Rural Affairs**

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# Northern Ireland Carrier Bag Levy Annual Statistics 2020/21



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## Key points

- During the eighth year of operation, 56.2 million carrier bags were dispensed by retailers under the carrier bag levy in Northern Ireland.
- This was 30.2% lower than the previous year, with 24.3 million fewer bags dispensed. The number of lower rate bags dispensed decreased by 26.0% between 2019/20 and 2020/21 while the number of upper rate bags dispensed decreased by 34.0%.
- The number of carrier bags dispensed in 2020/21 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 8 of the 5p levy saw an 81.3% reduction in bag numbers dispensed annually compared to the baseline.
- The proceeds of the levy for 2020/21 totalled £2.2 million, a decrease of £2.2 million (50.5%) from the previous year.

**Coverage:** Northern Ireland  
**Frequency:** Annual  
**Reporting Period:** 1 April 2020 to 31 March 2021, referred to as 2020/21  
**Next update:** Data for 2021/22 will be published in August 2022

**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)

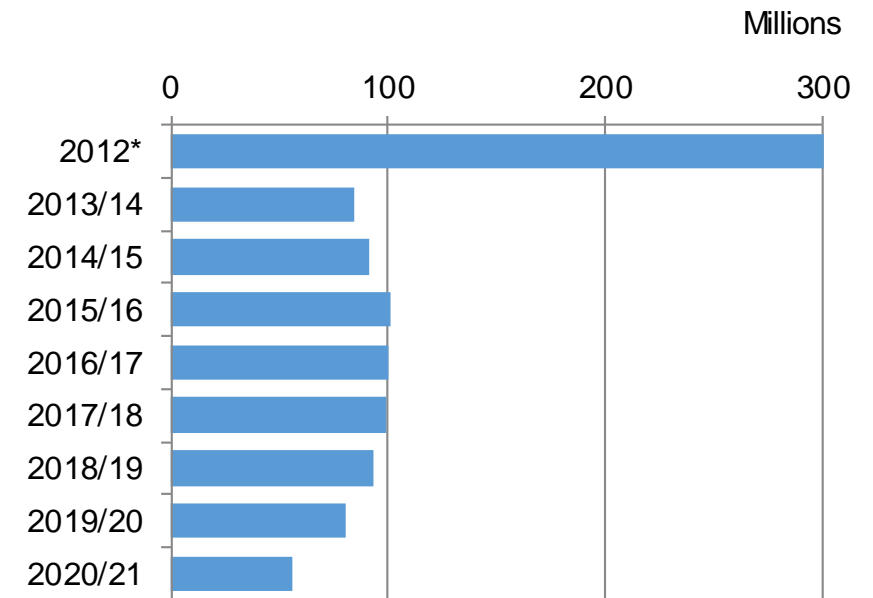
## Introduction

The purpose of this publication is to report on the number of carrier bags dispensed under the Carrier Bags Charge Regulations in Northern Ireland for the financial year 2020/21. The figures relate to the number of bags dispensed by retailers between 1 April 2020 and 31 March 2021 as notified to the Department by 30 June 2021. Users of this report include government policy makers, local government officials, retailers, general public, media and environmental organisations.

## Overview

- During the eighth year of operation, 56.2 million carrier bags were dispensed by retailers under the carrier bag levy in Northern Ireland.
- This was 30.2% lower than the previous year, with 24.3 million fewer bags dispensed. The number of lower rate bags dispensed decreased by 26.0% between 2019/20 and 2020/21 while the number of upper rate bags dispensed decreased by 34.0%.
- The number of carrier bags dispensed in 2020/21 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 8 of the 5p levy saw an 81.3% reduction in bag numbers dispensed annually compared to the baseline figure which meant approximately 243.8 million fewer bags in circulation in 2020/21 and an estimated 1.7 billion fewer since the introduction of the levy.
- The proceeds of the levy for 2020/21 totalled £2.2 million, a decrease of £2.2 million (50.5%) from the previous year. Proceeds are taken from audited Departmental financial accounts and are not Official Statistics. They cannot be directly calculated from bag usage figures due to differences in timing and recording but many of the factors affecting bag numbers will influence the amount of levy collected.

**Figure 1: Carrier bags dispensed by year**  
Northern Ireland, 2012 to 2020/21



\*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.

## Seasonal Variation and Trends

The total number of bags dispensed in 2020/21 was 56.2 million which is an overall decrease of 30.2% and equates to 24.3 million fewer bags dispensed since 2019/20.

**Lower rate** bags are those costing the customer only the 5p levy whereas **upper rate** bags are those which have had a price added by the retailer in advance of the 5p levy being applied.

The number of lower rate bags dispensed fell by 26.0% to 28.3 million bags while the number of upper rate bags dispensed fell by 34.0% to 27.8 million bags.

Until 2019/20 the majority of bags dispensed in Northern Ireland were lower rate bags. In 2020/21, the proportion of lower and upper rate bags dispensed under the levy were equal at 50% each. Figure 2 illustrates how the proportion of upper rate bags have been increasing until 2019/20 while the total number of bags dispensed under the levy has been decreasing since 2015/16.

In 2020/21 retailers in Northern Ireland dispensed 14.0 million bags during quarter 1 (April to June 2020), 15.6 million during quarter 2 (July to September 2020) and 15.4 million during quarter 3 (October to December 2020). The number of bags dispensed during quarter 4 (January to March 2021) reduced to 11.2 million.

In seeking to manage the challenges of the Covid-19 outbreak the Department implemented temporary legislation to amend and exempt bag charge/levy charges on home delivery groceries from 01 April 2020 to 30 September 2020. As a consequence, and as shown in Figure 3, the usual pattern of bags dispensed changed in 2020/21 as the numbers in quarter 1 (April to June) did not increase as they normally would following quarter 4. Rather, the number of bags continued to decrease which coincides with the first lockdown period. In this lockdown period many retail outlets were closed with restricted movement introduced. The expected peak in quarter 3, as recorded in previous statistical returns (October to December) did not occur which is likely to have been influenced by the restrictions prevalent in that time period.

**Figure 2: Carrier bags dispensed by rate**

Northern Ireland, 2014/15 to 2020/21

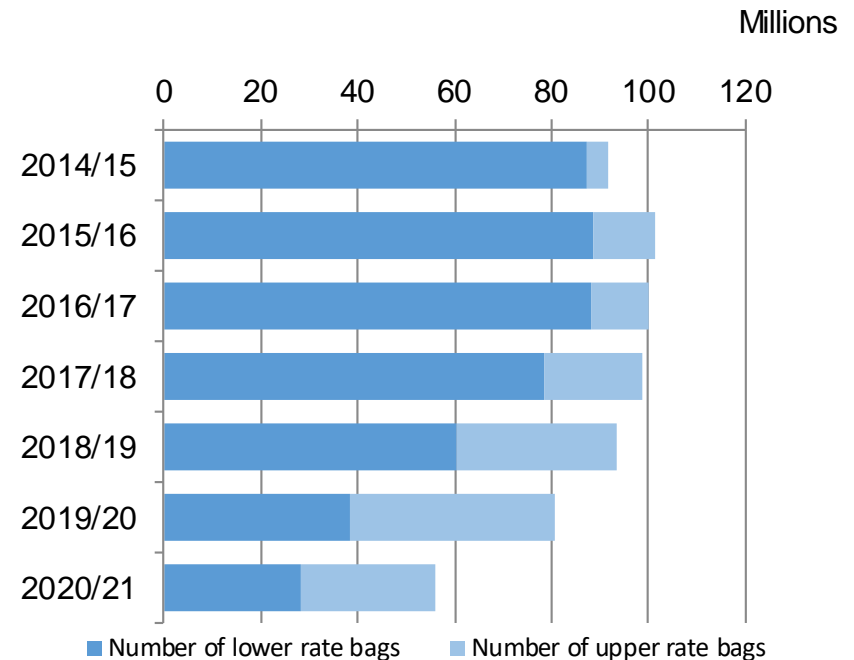
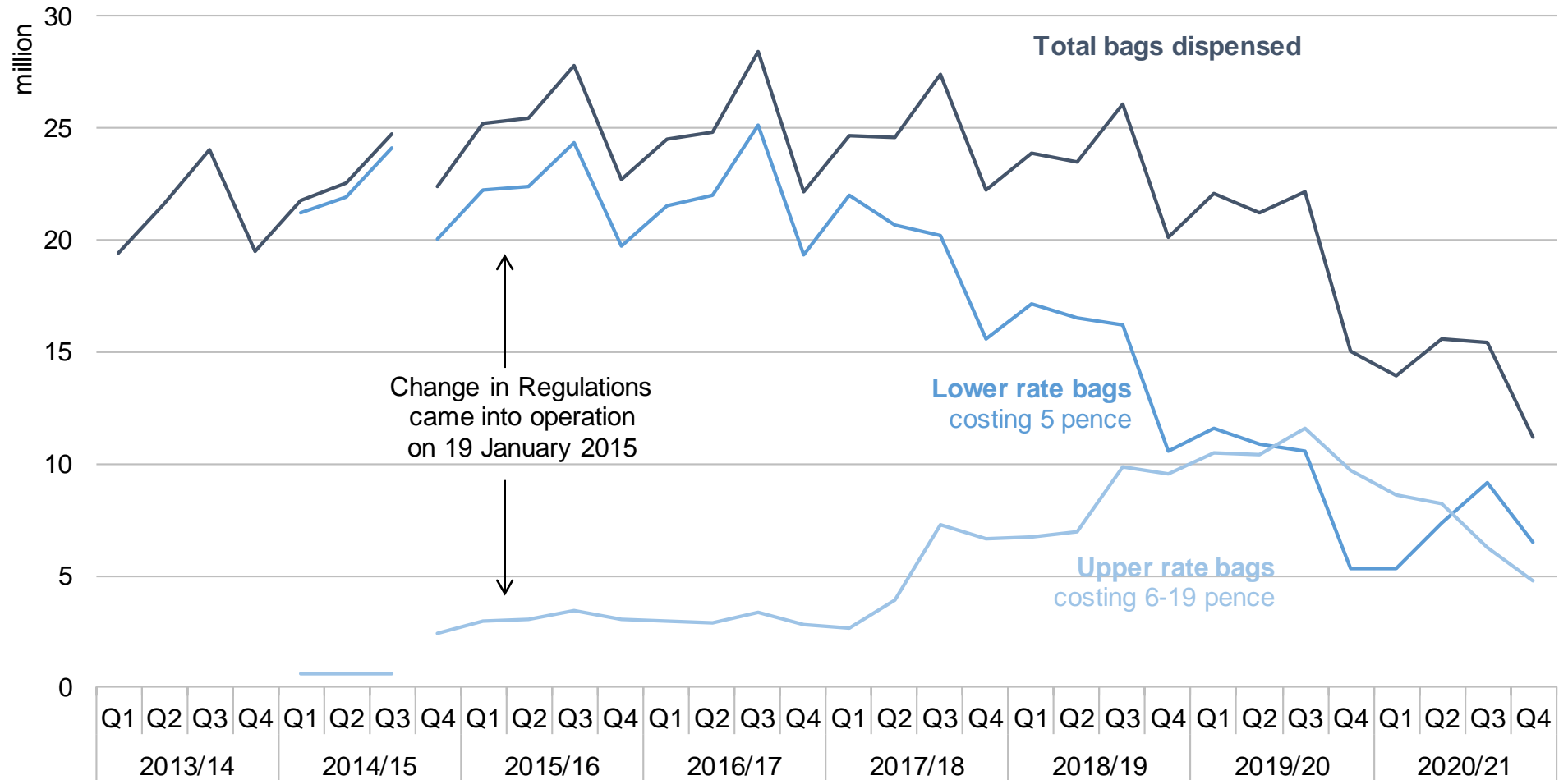


Figure 3 also shows the long term trend of increasing upper rate bag numbers has been reversed with a steady fall in the number of these bags dispensed from a peak of 11.6 million in quarter 3 2019/20. Some retailers have increased the price of their bags to 20 pence and above which means they are now dispensing heavier duty bags outside the scope of the levy, retaining the proceeds, with the volumes of these bags dispensed not declared. In relation to lower rate bags, the long term trend has been a steady reduction in numbers and use of lower rate bags, however, in 2020/21 an increase in their use was recorded. This may be partly related to the temporary exemption for home deliveries during which lower rate bags were used.

Looking at the percentage change in total bag numbers dispensed compared to the same quarters last year, all showed reductions with the largest decrease recorded in quarter 1 (36.8%) coinciding with the first lockdown. The largest decrease for lower rate bags was also recorded in quarter 1 with numbers halving to 5.3 million. All quarters recorded a decrease in upper rate bags compared to 2019/20.

**Figure 3: Number of carrier bags dispensed by quarter, year and rate**  
Northern Ireland, Q1 2013/14 to Q4 2020/21



## Tables

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

Northern Ireland, 2016/17 to 2020/21

| Quarter             |                   |                   |                   |                   |                   |  | <i>Millions</i>                                 |  |
|---------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|--|---|--|
|                     | 2016/17           | 2017/18           | 2018/19           | 2019/20           | 2020/21           | <i>Difference<br/>in latest<br/>year</i> | <i>Percentage<br/>change in<br/>latest year</i> |  |
| April to June       | 24,508,122        | 24,635,285        | 23,854,385        | 22,082,691        | 13,960,084        | -8,122,607                               | -36.8%  |  |
| July to September   | 24,811,653        | 24,557,005        | 23,466,144        | 21,238,126        | 15,595,341        | -5,642,785                               | -26.6%  |  |
| October to December | 28,452,320        | 27,432,279        | 26,045,800        | 22,133,230        | 15,417,718        | -6,715,512                               | -30.3%  |  |
| January to March    | 22,121,782        | 22,194,900        | 20,132,635        | 15,026,910        | 11,198,697        | -3,828,213                               | -25.5%  |  |
| <b>Total</b>        | <b>99,893,877</b> | <b>98,819,469</b> | <b>93,498,964</b> | <b>80,480,957</b> | <b>56,171,840</b> | <b>-24,309,117</b>                       | <b>-30.2%</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, 2016/17 to 2020/21

| Quarter             |                   |                   |                   |                   |                   |  | <i>Millions</i>                                 |  |
|---------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|--|---|--|
|                     | 2016/17           | 2017/18           | 2018/19           | 2019/20           | 2020/21           | <i>Difference<br/>in latest<br/>year</i> | <i>Percentage<br/>change in<br/>latest year</i> |  |
| April to June       | 21,559,154        | 21,982,429        | 17,134,322        | 11,588,853        | 5,350,858         | -6,237,995                               | -53.8%  |  |
| July to September   | 21,960,217        | 20,638,358        | 16,542,143        | 10,837,871        | 7,365,200         | -3,472,671                               | -32.0%  |  |
| October to December | 25,134,753        | 20,169,355        | 16,191,428        | 10,526,863        | 9,144,671         | -1,382,192                               | -13.1%  |  |
| January to March    | 19,337,101        | 15,581,097        | 10,557,398        | 5,315,467         | 6,466,195         | 1,150,728                                | 21.6%   |  |
| <b>Total</b>        | <b>87,991,225</b> | <b>78,371,239</b> | <b>60,425,291</b> | <b>38,269,054</b> | <b>28,326,924</b> | <b>-9,942,130</b>                        | <b>-26.0%</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, 2016/17 to 2020/21

| Quarter             | 2016/17           | 2017/18           | 2018/19           | 2019/20           | 2020/21           | Millions                  |                                  |
|---------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|---------------------------|----------------------------------|
|                     |                   |                   |                   |                   |                   | Difference in latest year | Percentage change in latest year |
| April to June       | 2,948,968         | 2,652,856         | 6,720,063         | 10,493,838        | 8,609,226         | -1,884,612                | -18.0%                           |
| July to September   | 2,851,436         | 3,918,647         | 6,924,001         | 10,400,255        | 8,230,141         | -2,170,114                | -20.9%                           |
| October to December | 3,317,567         | 7,262,924         | 9,854,372         | 11,606,367        | 6,273,047         | -5,333,320                | -46.0%                           |
| January to March    | 2,784,681         | 6,613,803         | 9,575,237         | 9,711,443         | 4,732,502         | -4,978,941                | -51.3%                           |
| <b>Total</b>        | <b>11,902,652</b> | <b>20,448,230</b> | <b>33,073,673</b> | <b>42,211,903</b> | <b>27,844,916</b> | <b>-14,366,987</b>        | <b>-34.0%</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, 2016/17 to 2020/21

|                   | 2016/17           | 2017/18           | 2018/19           | 2019/20           | 2020/21           |
|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|
| Lower rate bags   | 88%               | 79%               | 65%               | 48%               | 50%               |
| Upper rate bags   | 12%               | 21%               | 35%               | 52%               | 50%               |
| <b>Total bags</b> | <b>99,893,877</b> | <b>98,819,469</b> | <b>93,498,964</b> | <b>80,480,957</b> | <b>56,171,840</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).

Tables providing information from 2013/14 are provided 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).

## Carrier Bags Charge 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. Up until 2019/20 there was a strong increase in the number of upper rate bags with an average of 10.6 million bags dispensed per quarter in that year. Upper rate bag numbers reduced in 2020/21 so that the proportion of lower and upper bags are now equal. 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.

On 1<sup>st</sup> April 2020, the Carrier Bags Charge Regulations across Northern Ireland were temporarily amended to exempt carrier bags used for home grocery delivery in line with the other UK administrations and in seeking to ensure customer safety. This exemption expired on 30<sup>th</sup> September 2020.

Provisional results from the Continuous Household Survey environmental module are published in the [Environmental Statistics Report](#) and show that 82% of respondents in the 2020/21 survey were reported to be very/fairly concerned about environmental issues. This is higher than the 2019/20 result but this comparison should be made with caution as the methodology and response rate were greatly changed in 2020/21 due to covid-19. The survey also showed that most respondents selected that they had Reused, Recycled and disposed of waste products appropriately which would include the reusing of plastic bags. New questions were introduced to the Continuous Household Survey on carrier bags in 2020/21. Household respondents were asked how much they paid for the last carrier bag they bought. Almost one in three (29 per cent) responded that they did not buy a carrier bag, whilst 24 per cent bought bags costing 5 pence with another 24 per cent buying bags costing 6p – 19 pence.

As part of the consideration of existing environmental legislation across the Department, in June of this year DAERA released an 8 week public consultation to review the existing Carrier Bag legislation in place across Northern Ireland. This consultation closed on 27<sup>th</sup> July 2021 with responses used to formulate, develop and implement future Carrier Bag Levy policy across NI.

## Background information

1. This is the eighth year of the carrier bag levy in Northern Ireland. These are the final official statistics for 2020/21. The Department intends to publish 2021/22 figures in August 2022. [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/ni/2014/7/pdfs/ni\\_20140007\\_en.pdf](http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ni/2014/7/pdfs/ni_20140007_en.pdf)
3. The figures are based on data supplied by 1,907 retailers in Northern Ireland as notified to the Department by 30 June 2021. 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. Using recent declaration figures for comparison, it is estimated that the number of bags notified by 30 June is on average 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 [online](#). 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.

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