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Rory Stewart MP
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1 September 2011

From Lord Henley
Parliamentary Under Secretary

Dear Rory,

Thank you for your e-mail of 18 August on behalf of your constituent Mr Chris Cant of Lake View, Bampton, Penrith about plastic bag charges.

The Government is working with leading retailers and the British Retail Consortium to help reduce the environmental impact of plastic bags. Over the last four years we have seen a significant reduction, around 40%, in the issuing of single-use bags. However, the latest figures show a reversal of this trend – a rise of 6% on the last reporting period. This is unacceptable.

We expect retailers to take responsibility and cut down on the number of single-use carrier bags they hand out, but the ability to take action also lies with consumers who can decline to accept them in favour of reusable alternatives. If results do not improve we will consider additional measures, including legislation.

Defra will contribute to the European Commission's current consultation on a number of possible options for the reduction in the use of plastic bags, the results of which will also inform our decision.

The key message is to reuse bags as often as possible. Paper is often suggested as a better alternative, but it does not lend itself readily to reuse unless it is combined with other materials, which then makes recycling very difficult. All bags have an environmental impact, and while paper bags are derived from a renewable resource, they are heavier than plastic bags and can use more energy to produce and transport. Studies have shown that reusing carrier bags is more environmentally beneficial than simply switching the material they are made of.

Carrier bags account for only a very small proportion of the waste we produce, but they can be particularly visible when discarded irresponsibly and are a potent symbol of anti-social littering. They can also cause great harm to marine life if they get into the sea. Reducing the number of bags we use would be a step towards more responsible living that would also encourage us to think about the resources we use.

Helen Haggblade

ff LORD HENLEY

Private Secretary to Lord Henley